

# The Ruins of Nostalgia

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On childhood road trips she had been hypnotized by the lyric rising and falling of the wires between steel telephone poles shaped like Victorian headmistresses rigid and lonely in the fields. And dreamed of the galvanized cables lying peacefully on the Pacific floor, galvanizing words to worlds. Cords were going the way they had come, speechlessly retreating into the ether, but melancholics and aesthetes browsed the internet at night looking for the kinds of connections only objects from their spun-sugar pasts could forge. \* They searched for rotary phones, the kind with the curly telephone cord that always had one kink in it, curling the wrong way or refusing to curl, like the one she'd spent hours as a teenager re-curling with her fingers while lying on the green-carpeted living room floor, trying to learn how to talk on the phone: how to withstand long pauses, how to wind politely down, how to say what she really wanted to say. \* The kink had refused to curl, the thing that had wanted to be said kept vanishing when she tried to say it into the phone, like stars that vanish unless you look at them indirectly. The black rotary phone was made of star matter. So many millions of black rotary phones were buried deep in landfills, their cords spiraling and spiraling into millions of silences. Like any phone, they had held out the carrot of communication, but given only the stick of circumlocution. \* So didn't they belong heaped among the ruins of nostalgia?

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She was reluctant to admit she felt nostalgic for symmetry. Symmetry for nostalgic felt she admit to reluctant was she. She was a well-schooled modernist. She knew symmetry was just a mindless mirroring of that most atavistic of images—the face. The face of a loved one, or a snow owl, or a saint (none of which were symmetrical, anyway). But what, she wondered, about that little Carnegie library in which she had once spent untold hours doing her homework, modest temple of philanthropy and self-betterment, with its oval windows equidistant to each side of the entablatured front door? Or the reversed birds eyeing each other on Persian carpets entwined in stylized foliage she'd seen in the carpet shop (long since torn down) downtown? Or the perfectly symmetrical Italian Renaissance villas she had looked up on the internet? Or most buildings, gardens, objects, art objects, signage, and public works, up until the twentieth century? Some of which were still circulating their symmetrical disorder? (The Carnegie library was now an antiques mall.) \* Symmetry had worn out its welcome, she could see that. Like ornament, like swan kings, like voyaging by sea. Like the black rotary phones in the antiques mall. For symmetry, everyone now knew, had been hiding something: interiors that upheld systems of asymmetry. And philanthropy, too, had been hiding something: an interior of misanthropy in the form of disparities it did nothing to reverse. But oh the aphrodisiac of equal distribution, of OH CET ECHO, RUE LA VALEUR—of a symmetry so perfect it atomizes its interior, till there is no more interior, only tiers and tiers of exteriors, mirroring surfaces upon surfaces. (Even software cannot recognize the perfection of the lost loved one's face.) \* She asked: was it symmetry's fault that it had afforded an orderly façade for systemic asymmetrical disorder? It was probably philanthropy's fault that, in a just world, it would not exist. She asked: now that everyone lived in asymmetrical houses, and worked in asymmetrical buildings with asymmetrical public art in trapezoid plazas, were power structures any more symmetrical than when symmetry had hidden asymmetry? — Or were we, as she suspected, just left with an unjust world trashed with lopsided stuff? \* She took refuge in the

antiques mall, knowing her face was also hiding something: the distorted Picasso face of her true self, distorted with grief and love and desire and inquisitiveness and acquisitiveness and bitterness and confusion and hope . . . as she furtively stroked a black rotary phone in the ruins of nostalgia.

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We felt like nostalgic futurists, one half of our bodies aimed with hope at the prospect of future utopias, one half aimed with dread at the prospect of future utopias, torquing ever backward at an inexorably receding past. Take the green roof, the greenfield, the greensward, the greenwashing effects of green how I love you green. We wanted to be saturated in this new world of green, but wasn't it just the old world of green, for which everyone had long been nostalgic, in new guise? We sat on our balconies overlooking the green roofs of the city, noting that the rate of rediscoveries that seemed like discoveries seemed to be increasing. Maybe looking forward was actually, depending on your standpoint in history, looking backward, or the reverse. What *was* certain, from the perspective of our balconies, was that everything was always receding. If we could look, instead, into a sphere, like an idealized medieval peasant, would we see all that it was requisite to see: the four seasons succeeding each other with reassuring regularity all around us—interrupted only by the occasional seven years' war or harvest moon—till we too were rotating in a rotund cocoon of regularized reiterations? A cocoon, or a vacuum? Were our cocoons actually vacuums, our vacuums cocoons, were we emerging from emptinesses only to empty into emptinesses, the way even green is a temporary ink injected into the leaves of the city's green roofs it then recedes from, leaving us with the incessant recessions of the ruins of nostalgia?

## About the Author

**Donna Stonecipher's** fifth book of poetry, *Transaction Histories* (2018), was named by *The New York Times* as one of the 10 best poetry books of 2018. Her sixth, *The Ruins of Nostalgia*, is forthcoming in 2023. She has also published one book of criticism, *Prose Poetry and the City* (2018). Her poems have been published in many journals, including *The Paris Review*, and have been translated into seven languages. She translates from German, and her translation of Austrian poet Friederike Mayröcker's *études*, for which she received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, appeared in 2020. She lives in Berlin.



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