

The Studs Terkel Blues  
 Double Life  
 Shadow Traffic  
 Riding with Boom Boom  
 Gimme Back My Radio  
 The Paris Notebooks  
 so damn sure of us  
 Onomatopoeia  
 Pencil Pusher  
 History, Too, Is a Simple Machine  
 Beautiful Mutants  
 Mud and Stars  
 What Keeps Me Awake  
 A Guide to Endangered Monsters  
 The Book of Whimsy  
 Beat Attitude  
 Rented Mule  
 The Almost Sound of Snow Falling  
 The Generation of Forms  
 Yeasayer  
 The Incoherent Pull of Want  
 unfinished litany  
 Drugged by Hollywood  
 Counterfeit Moon  
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 Dream Catcher  
 You Know the Type  
 The Most Honest Syllable Is Shhh  
 Patch Job  
 after working hours  
 Make Me That Happy  
 Before the Puppets Could Sing  
 Beyond the Sidewalk  
 Artifacts  
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 Loss and Foundering  
 Gasconade  
 Out of Blue  
 Arson  
 The Ugly Side of the Lake  
 Waiting for the Wind to Rise  
 Fragile Capacities  
 Throwback Thursdays  
 The Curve of Her Arm  
 Dear Youngstown

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 Karen Schubert

# Dear Youngstown

by

**Karen Schubert**



**NightBallet Press**

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*To Youngstown,  
my adopted home,  
with affection and hope*

**Dear Youngstown** by Karen Schubert

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*Zoland Poetry*

***Some of these poems were written during my AmeriCorps VISTA year of service at a neighborhood development nonprofit. The stories are meant to convey an emotional truth, not a literal truth.***

—Karen Schubert  
February, 2019

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quilt stuffing, winter  
curb snow. My seatmate

is reading light fiction,  
she tells me

she is sorry  
to say I don't look  
very good

but just after  
the clouds

make a monkey face  
they hold hands

they open  
to the dotted lights

of Pittsburgh and  
I'm almost home

I close my eyes  
hollow my body

for flight    We rise  
and I arrange

the sick bag  
with an apologetic look

toward my seatmate  
I don't need it

yet    Meanwhile the  
upsidedown clouds

begin their  
impersonations—

furrowed troughs,  
city skyline, the light

thick gold, a cloud  
castle over there

My seatmate offers  
a mint    The clouds shift

into a swimmer,  
a penis, an anvil,

the meringue my son  
used to make

when he was perfecting  
lemon pie, all those

lemons over  
the jaggy juicer

Now the clouds  
are like crystals

we grew in glass jars  
then mist around mountains

We follow Christmas lights  
along a dark hall, step down into a room  
open to its 20' ceilings,  
filmy windows stuck shut for years.  
These days it's an art studio,  
available for rent, includes a rusty cabinet,  
mottled kitchen countertop shelf.

The rain outside makes it steamy  
where we sit in lawn chairs, kitchen chairs,  
camp chairs, somebody's upholstered bench.  
A couple artists tack an old stage curtain  
to the wall to take up the sound bounce.  
There's something about a room  
of people who love what you love.

Who else would stay five hours?  
Photos will go up on the 'net,  
poets and writers in front of jaggy  
particleboard and paint splash. But this day,  
it's all over itself with ambiance—  
cloth covered table creaking with books,  
readers and writers so funny  
and earnest, melting ice ring floating  
lime slices into the punch,  
everyone walking out saying  
*we gotta do this again.*

Two philosophers and a chemist walk into  
The Beat where I'm grading essays  
in which my students are wrestling SB5,  
the bill their parents—teachers, cops,  
firefighters—are sick over,  
and the philosophers are discussing  
the governor's proposed cuts  
to higher education. I tell them about  
the rally in Columbus. Our conversation  
drifts to uprisings in North Africa,  
the tsunami in Japan—we should feel lucky  
we are home, our children  
not drowned or detained,  
but we are shaken. One of ten Americans  
has lost a job, my friend  
from high school who worked since she was sixteen  
eats bologna from the food pantry.  
A quarter of us already live in poverty.  
Students work two or three jobs,  
take care of little sibs, pay their parents'  
mortgages, and the House of Representatives  
wants their Pell grants, the governor wants  
our pensions, our unions,  
the banks are hungry for our houses  
and we don't understand what they will gain  
if we all live like they lived  
in Egypt, the day before the revolution.

Dear race, dear card-carrying hatred,  
dear kids of the 1500 brought up  
from the South to break the steel strike,  
dear redlining, dear kids of the KKK  
elected to office, dear white flight,  
demolitions list, gang symbols,  
dear handguns, you're killing us.

Dear urban farmer selling greens  
from beds raised above the lead,  
dear hoop houses, heaps of mulch  
and compost, gladiolas spiking up  
where there was scruff from an abandoned  
lawn, wheelbarrows of urbanite off to  
the landfill. Dear skinny kid packing  
bags of spinach, you grew that.

Dear Occupy Youngstown with your  
OY sign in Christmas tree lights, Defend  
Youngstown, Youngstown Neighborhood  
Development Corporation painting curtains  
on window boards to look like  
someone's home, Lake to River filling my car  
with organic apples and muddy potatoes,  
Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative,  
it ain't over. The fat lady  
isn't even warming up. She isn't even  
on the census—walked away from that  
great house. Let's buy it and fix it up.

Dear Youngstown, dear Mahoning River Valley, dear Mill Creek, Brier Hill, Rocky Ridge, Cornersburg, Steelton, Smokey Hollow, dear Poland and Liberty, dear urban artists, suburban teenagers, rural farmers, frackers, ichthyologists, snappers, eagles, accidental brown bear wandering in from Pennsylvania, dear deer leaping into traffic, fawning surprise.

Dear kids of Italians, Slovaks, Lebanese, Greeks, Puerto Ricans, Russians, Southern Blacks, Connecticut Yankees, Appalachians, Hungarians, Irish, Indians, eat your corned beef, pierogis, latkes, meatballs, baklava, gyros, falafel, greens, fish fry, tamales, eat your wings, your ribs, your foot long, pickled knuckles, blood sausage, pasties, poppadoms, gelato.

Let's face it, dear, embrace it: suites in the Erie Terminal, a theater in a church, a church in a theater, a brewery in a church, the brewery in the B&O Station, belly up. Rust+belt = artists sculpting scrap steel, old bakery-turned-studios, mirrors framed with wood from fallen houses. Dear potters, your slip is showing.

Up the hill, Youngstown State U., dear old You Screwed Up, the dream's still for sale, at millennial prices. Dear finance majors, musicians, physicists, nurses, writers, political scientists, actors, philosophers, first-in-the-family diploma seekers, drop-outs, drop-ins, commuters, scholars—forget knowing where you came from. You know. Remember the world is full of places like Youngstown, and places nothing like Youngstown.

It's impressive. Tiny saddles on the herders—robots so small they would fit in a spoon. Whistles silent to dog ears, but you should see the crickets shut up. When a stray tries to scale its plastic bin, a robotic wrangler swings a tinsel lasso.

There was talk of a rodeo. It was a joke, of course; crickets don't buck their riders, but they can be taught dressage. The robot cowboys would rather enact the gunfight at the OK Corral. They find the rodeo idea humiliating. The human farmers don't like violence, they've just been reading up on the popularity of flea circuses. They plan to teach the crickets to play cricket, although they may be too cooperative for competitive sports. Also, crickets that valuable are vulnerable to rustlers.

Cricketologist Hemple Blanden writes that crickets don't grieve when their bin mates are shipped off to make protein powder for bars and shakes. R&D is working on using the whole cricket so nothing is wasted. Obviously, it takes a lot of cricket hides to make a pair of shoes. A line of cricket-based dog food was discontinued. A microbrewer tried a cricket mash, but the pale ale was too hoppy. Don't laugh. At Suzie's Dogs & Drafts down on Phelps St. you can get an all-potato dog topped with crickets. They're crunchy, and they squeak when you bite. Later, you might imagine Buddy Holly in Times Square. You might have some luck.

#### 4 Bringing Home the Upholstered Chairs

There is even snow on the radio  
between Fredonia and Erie.

The white sun is high but  
there's no horizon—just snow

on the highway and blooming  
over guard rails, whirling up

fields like dust devils. We track ruts  
where cars have gone down,

pickup mangled where it careened  
off a semi, northbound lane closed

for miles. We stop trying to tune  
the radio, put in Dire Straits.

*You're so far away from me,*  
we sing, passing Northeast,

as far west as you can go  
in Pennsylvania without driving

into Lake Erie, frozen and white,  
imperceptible. We pull off to rest

our knuckles, a dog on a leash falls  
into snow. *It looks like that guy's fishing,*

you say. We should be home  
by now. The guy with Georgia plates

might be wondering why people  
live here, but that's what we say

about Georgia when the sun is white  
hot in the south and our fields

are operatic in color, snow  
percolated into the water table.

It's too dry for snowmen, you  
can't even pelt me with a snowball

at the road's edge  
scare me, the way  
they ripple. I can't tell  
what they are.

III

On the wide avenue  
heading to the first  
Arab-American festival,  
it's sprinkling, we are  
talking about the rain,  
maybe it will blow over.  
All day I have thought  
of spiced meat  
shaved off with the long knife.  
The road is slick,  
on the sidewalk  
three men running,  
one pulls ahead,  
jerking and spinning  
away from the others, arcs  
into the road, crossing  
three lanes. I yell  
stopstopstop we hit  
the horn and brake,  
slide, squeal, wait to feel it  
but he bounds across  
our path. I look hard  
but he is laughing and pointing  
at his friends on the curb.  
We watch him walk.



I

She fills my window  
 with her long head,  
 the click-click  
 filmstrip memory:  
 empty window, dark eye—  
 thud, scrape, then  
 wail of the driver  
 who saves even moths,  
 flutter dust on the inside  
 of his hands.  
 Pull over, pull over  
 says my voice  
 to the wailing man,  
 whose arms lift to the god  
 he doesn't believe in.  
 We circle back  
 and drag the warm doe  
 by her bone legs  
 into the grass.  
 I'm sorry  
 he tells her.  
 The pickup driver  
 coming the other way  
 also hit the deer,  
 looks down  
 at us, on our knees.  
 You sure you're ok?  
 he asks several times.

II

Oh no, I'll call you back,  
 and the something-happened  
 minutes tick tick  
 until the buzz of the phone  
 and the explanation, Opossum.  
 Ran into my path.  
 I ask, was it wiry? I don't know.  
 It's cold,  
 I had gloves on.  
 Later he tells me  
 Pieces of paper

but it's safer to walk on than ice  
 and we have Valentine's dinner

at Monteen's where our waitress  
 fusses over us, overnight

bags chilling in the minivan while we  
 get sticky on bbq and salty greens.

Louis Armstrong sings us home—  
 it's been a long day but the world is,

we agree, wonderful, and we share  
 a blanket and watch a movie

about a midwife who lived after  
 the Revolution when no one knew

what would happen next, when a woman  
 couldn't own her own house.

Her husband went to debtor's prison.  
 She chopped up the fence to bank

the fire. It's still cold when we wake  
 in Ohio of course, but February

is running out of time. Presidents' Day  
 the mail carrier doesn't walk

her path in my front yard. I watch  
 winter through the window, every twig

furry, plump squirrels preferring  
 the elevations. I'm out of milk,

but it can wait I think,  
 opening my friend's new book.

You are receiving this letter because your  
house is empty. The window on the second floor

is open and the long white curtain is blowing  
out. As we drove by we wept

and checked our pockets for lottery tickets.  
Your neighbor has too many wind chimes

and we noticed a dead armadillo  
on your porch. We suspect your house

is ~~haunted~~ vacant. The painted stucco is like mint  
ice cream. The board and batten shutters

have cut-out moons. We noticed no children  
playing on your street. If you are ~~still alive~~

reading this, we ask you to pay your taxes.  
Come back and trim the raspberries. Throw out

the Morris chair. Watch the bees.  
Pianos do not make good buckets.

If you are reading this, tell us why you left:  
There is a fine for abandonment.

We will come to your new house  
and take away your memories.

dumb as a brick the house  
deep as grass the glass  
meters tagged all hollow  
or shouldering squatters drops  
slate and shakes rounds  
of mortar sparrows chandeliering  
plaster cracks trees heaving  
the brick walk mice in the sectional  
rain swells icing sills feral cats  
pad someone's vinyl collection  
belts shoe xylophone yellow  
penny saver swayback porch roof  
gutters choke and hatch saplings  
next door is empty and  
next to that and next  
year the mayor will  
tear down 1000 I  
grew up here someone says

My neighbor mutters  
 about Norway maples.  
 I would have cut it but  
 the roots, just inside the snarled  
 garden that edges my drive,  
 prove it isn't mine.  
 All the same, I crept in  
 to pull saplings—greedy  
 colonialists—dug up  
 poison ivy, 20' board  
 (slug city), screws, frisbee.

Under years of leaves  
 I found may apples, bloodroot.  
 I planted hostas, lungwort,  
 sweet woodruff. In winter,  
 my sculptor made  
 a snowman to show where  
 he will put Max, steel sentry  
 tall as a man, feet on my  
 property, shadow on my  
 neighbor's. The Norway  
 maple—too big to cut—  
 will heave my drive,  
 scrape my bedroom  
 window. To appease me,  
 it has set little buds.  
 Birds light so close  
 I can hear everything.

I

What your aunt doesn't say is *I'm tired  
 of dying*. She says *I'm so tired*.  
 Her new elephants parade across  
 the coffee table, trunks up in celebration.  
 Her face is puffy from radiation.  
 She bought the nurses boxes  
 of chocolates. They gave her cream  
 for the burn above her blue eye.

II

My arm rises and falls, you sleep  
 like your body is full of bees.  
 I don't feel the cold  
 of other winters.

III

Our friend loves a man  
 who went back to his former love.  
*Men can't be trusted*, you say.  
 I believe you.  
*Neither can women*, you say.  
 I believe you.

IV

The sapling bends and bends  
 in this wind, I can't see  
 the small roots hanging on.  
 My daughter listens,  
 calls again.

V

What your aunt says is  
*I guess this is how  
 it will be from now on*.

VI

What we don't say.

Backs up against our piece of wall, we're holding cold drafts at Cedars the week before it closes. My friend's been coming down since her bartender boyfriend snuck her in at sixteen. They danced to traveling shows, bass that thumped the ribs, garage bands of music school kids playing belly-button gazers and rockabilly. The R&B guitars and horns jammed together thirty years. On blues night, a grizzled harmonica player stepped up from the floor for a few numbers. The acoustic guitar played alone on the patio. Cedars will reopen somewhere else in a month but everyone's here, *I haven't seen you in years*, cell phone cameras flashing. *This was more than just a bar* on the wall in Sharpie.

The patio is decked out in little white lights, my friends lovely in their jeans and boots and the lead singer's telling us about his baby. I have my own memories. Halloween costumes that must have taken weeks to construct. The guy dressed as *The Last Supper* was so wide he couldn't turn around. A fundraiser for Sonny's heart. One night my friend made me prove I could drive home so I walked the line in the parking lot singing *Mull Of Kintyre O mist rolling in from the sea*, even though Youngstown is landlocked, just a skinny river easing through the valley. And one Halloween I came as Flannery O'Connor. All night I said, *A good man is hard to find*, even though that isn't true.

*Lasterd*ay my grandson told me *I like it when you're here*. Like a pre-school rapper, he calls me *bad grandma*.

When his mom silhouettes the front porch curtains, he slides under the table. *I don't know where he is*,

I lie. *You had one job*, she teases. Earlier, we made pie—when I gave him an apple to cut, he said *Thanks, Babe*.

And here comes Halloween, *jaqueeners* everywhere, triangle teeth. The leaves are yellowing on the *naple tree*

and when he's a *chickmunk*, he packs his cheeks with grapes and shucks his clothes. Later we walk

the cemetery, past the high school band we watch through the window, return home and play baseball

with a cartoonish bat. *This is just for hitting baseballs*, he instructs. I toss the ball and he smacks it to the fence,

runs loops around the swing set. *Now I'll be the vampire*, he says. *Strike three. You're out*.

"The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon.  
We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough."  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

1

The boy-man steps out of the concrete  
community college building into the cold  
Ohio dark, crosses the pocked street,  
climbs to the top of the parking deck.  
Spread beneath him, the compressed horizon—  
new post office behind its razor wire,  
addiction recovery center. He unstraps  
his backpack, sets down his phone, steps  
over the guard rail, lies in the street  
where his body begs for a sheet.

2

Twenty artists and admins in the gallery  
around the corner eat apple cake, talk  
collaboration, look at slides of a mural—  
giant sleeping under ground—seems he  
will wake and crack open the field,  
shuck off the fence that ribs the sidewalk  
overhead. With dwindling resources  
we need to work together, we say.

3

Police cars surround the boy like  
wagons, ambulance creeps in  
backwards, red and blue lights blink  
windows where we stand dumb.  
We ask, hit-and-run? A cop says,  
Don't worry, he didn't come from  
your meeting. The obits say he was 19,  
lost his mother, leaves no siblings.  
So much death here—opioids, cancer,  
gunshots, babies walking off before  
they have shoes, kids with backpacks  
full of used books.

My friend sits behind a table of garlic,  
hot peppers, cucumbers she picked in dew.  
Three guys from the university are playing  
jazz, sultry. *I'm swooning*, I say. *It's the garlic*,  
she says back. At the next table, peaches,  
you smell them everywhere. A shoulder-round  
woman tells me about her banana bread,  
somebody selling kitchen things and there's  
the blender I've been looking for, with a heavy  
glass carafe. The husband, deep in a lawn chair,  
says *It works. If you need it, it's \$100.*  
*If you don't, it's \$5.* He winks. I buy a small  
stack of Bavarian ice cream dishes, tiny gray  
flowers and a silver rim, little plates for sugar  
cookies. A guy's cooking bbq ribs, and there's  
sweet corn and rat-tail beets, blueberries,  
basil, muffins and tie-dye. The baby I saw  
last autumn is walking from the hip,  
Jean from Marketing rides her bike down,  
Jim and Pat ask me how the kids are and it's  
half way to winter at the farmer's market  
but you'd never know it, the handles  
of my bags stretching long off my fingers,  
someone calling after me, *see you next week.*

Later that fall, they played  
     the Rag Doll  
     in Chicago, nothing  
  
 between them but Ray's bass,  
     Ella's eyes closed like  
     a ballad, swallowing down  
  
 the scat to ready for the British  
     tour. They'd gotten hitched  
     in Youngstown, by Justice  
  
 of the Peace Bruce R. Black,  
     while the band  
     was booked two weeks  
  
 at the Merry-Go-Round. Ella lied down  
     her age. Ray was 21—  
     she said she was 29—  
  
 said her address was 608 North Ave.  
     where today a catalpa  
     grows into power lines  
  
 next to the Dorothy Day House.  
     Those days Youngstown  
     was jumpin' with 75  
  
 theaters and class acts. Couldn't  
     turn around without  
     seeing men and women  
  
 in fine hats. It wasn't Georgia  
     but some kids knew  
     where to sit at the movies.  
  
 Hell, even Ella Fitzgerald's  
     marriage certificate  
     says *Colored* across the top  
  
 in formal cursive. *To curse, to curse,*  
     same root as Mexican  
     divorce, but Youngstown

Elbows deep in compost, now  
 that's my idea of a date,  
 you teasing out roots,  
 me pulling peanut shells  
 from the moist mix. We met  
 late, unlike the prom date  
 who teetered past our  
 restaurant window on new  
 heels, dress tight as a ski cap.  
  
     Wake with me  
 in my orange bedroom  
 with its polished wood floor.  
 Watch the pink peach light  
 slip in. Pour yourself  
 some coffee. We don't  
 have to decide what to do  
 with the rest of our lives.

30    **When I Put On Lipstick It Looks Like A Mistake**

The Mortician's Marketplace ad is on my newsfeed.  
Natural Corpse Odor Remover, vintage blue glass embalmer fluid.  
I used to think *The early bird gets the worm*  
was about the bird. But it's about the worm, isn't it?  
An email suggests we teach students about  
*individuals who overcame odds to make the mist of their lives.*  
This morning I found rose hips and lavender hotel lotion.  
They reminds me of elevators.  
I have learned so much from people I despise.  
I lost another watch, another lens cap.  
All my doors are broken.  
Our ancestors, we beat out of them 1000 languages.  
Put it this way: all the stars were named.

needed that wedding. At the Rag Doll,  
Ray fixes his famous  
stare, Ella all satin and shine,  
  
making good money, laying down  
tracks we're still  
talking about.

Mud and streamers of dry grass  
and candy wrappers drip down

the porch columns, second and third  
attempt at a robin's nest. I watch

the robin as I listen to my son  
in Wisconsin, every day his boss

screaming. We've had rain and wind,  
maybe the mud is too wet,

ledge too slim or open to storms.  
When my friend sees the scraps,

so much work by small feet,  
he cuts plywood and widens the ledge,

says we'll fill the drilled holes later.  
The robin's back and we're waiting

for a glimpse of blue, little fluffs  
with origami mouths. I guess

I'm saying sometimes much  
is against us, then here comes

a good thing we don't even understand.  
It's luck, sure, and work, not like we can

overcome anything, nor that we're always  
sunk. If she stays, the robin, I'll send pictures.

after we slide the cherry china cabinet back  
in front of the wall, so blind, so fresh.



My boyfriend and my mother paint  
my new dining room while I rest

in blankets. He is carving out cracks  
to the lathe and she, nimble on a ladder,

primes the entryway. We watch her cover  
the last patch of brick red. I'm down

with the fever going around. I hear her  
tell him this isn't the Sistine Chapel.

He says he learned on walls of the rich,  
Upper West Side. She is like a tropical

storm, littering counters with lists  
on envelopes. *Refinish bedroom floors.*

*Get roof estimates.* He is all details,  
matching plaster whorls on the ceiling

where post diluvian paint flaked for years.  
She is good enough. Let's do something

even if it's wrong. She is life is short,  
get out of the way. Say what you think.

Let's keep going. He is, Let's break  
for lunch. Asks me, *Should we check*

*your temp?* She says, *I'm worried you*  
*won't have this done before I go.* Next day

he brings three more grits of sandpaper,  
skinnier paint brush, adjustable roller handle,

calls a professional painter, plasterer,  
for advice. He is crime scene, tape and slow

collection of evidence. She is hit and run.  
They are two who love me, in the room

where we'll eat Christmas dinner on my  
great-grandmother's rose-rimmed plates,

I slide my hand into  
the pocket where the gun  
would be and get into  
my imagined car and turn on  
the music I feel that power  
you feel when you know  
what you have to do I pick up  
my friend we are looking  
for those guys and we'll find  
them too wipe them off  
the face of the earth  
we won't let them  
get away with it we are  
silent in our hunt and we see them  
at the intersection god they are  
stupid to be in the open like that  
we take aim and shoot  
the windshield blows up  
we shoot again someone screams  
I hit the gas and turn back  
to see them dead  
but it's not them some old people  
slump in their seats and I yell  
at my friend you said it was them  
and he yells no I didn't  
and we drive out of there  
and I try to imagine where we will go

Tricia and I idle through Brier Hill  
with clipboards and a camera  
we pass a church

two women and a man they call father  
carry bags of cans and laundry soap      one stops  
to balance a plastic trash can on her hip

we take notes and pictures  
of vacant houses

in Steelton an anxious man watches me  
from a window      I knock

our flyers say there is a meeting  
on neighborhood development

the phone rings at the office, a woman  
with a man's voice says can you help me says  
I'm afraid to sleep

we load the laundry soap, follow  
the man and his daughters down icy streets  
the backseats are full      I see their breath  
in February      sidewalks are gone

the anxious man opens the door and from a stuffed chair  
a blanched woman in a back brace tells me she can't walk  
much      hands me back the flyer

with her deep voice the woman who is afraid  
to sleep makes the sound of her crackling electricity  
cops chased a car into her porch steps  
broke her only viable exit

a colleague says a third of the people  
who call are crying

in six blocks we arrive at the house  
unload the food pantry bags  
small shoes line up by the door

we stop to talk to women on the Eastside  
who invite us into the living room

plywood windows, or you are rolling a joint,  
waiting for the bus that's late.

The muralist brings a mock-up of muscled men  
pouring molten steel down the side of the building.

Gold pools onto the sidewalk. It's a 3-D plan.  
Everybody's quiet then someone says steel's in the past.

The muralist thinks we're still in the glow  
but these days, stories are gray ash that settled

on laundry and one hundred thousand who left  
houses and businesses wide open like the rapture

only instead of heaven they went to Houston  
and Charlotte. *We're rebuilding*, someone says

unironically, since the mural will be on  
an empty building we still call what-it-used-to-be,

down the street from the amusement park  
that burned, wooden coaster's last spectacular ride.

Now Salvation Army's across from the  
Rescue Mission. Historic theater's XXX.

*Ok, let's look into the future*, says the muralist.  
*What do you see?* Silence again and someone

mentions 3-D printing and the park  
that's buying up land after houses fall

and underground gas tanks are yanked up.  
We are tired of our Titanic metaphors—

can't decide if we're patching up the hole,  
steering toward warmer waters, or

arranging the deck chairs. It's hard  
to be angry with people who are gone,

and we don't really know what happened  
anyway. And what does it matter. Either

you are rolling up your sleeves, wheeling tires  
from the vacant house, hammering up

to see an assembly line  
of chicken dinners for shut-ins  
they gift us steaming take-out boxes

a North Heights boy stands  
by his mother who says they tried to steal my siding  
my window is broke my boy is sick  
I got laid off

a woman calls to say she inherited  
her grandmother's house now the roof leaks

at the tent city under the bridge  
a plastic American flag sticks  
out of a mound of snow

a researcher tells me thousands  
of people live without water  
service tens of thousands without cars

a man in Sharon Line says if you are afraid  
to come into my house you are in  
the wrong business finger-stabs the air  
*racist redlining* he says, *write that down*

a young man on the Southside  
tells us this is a great neighborhood  
but the cops follow us all summer

Lincoln Knolls in autumn three teens  
with a basketball grin for the camera  
leaves on the old trees gold and red

someone cleaned out the house next door  
a mountain of trash the rats  
ran up and down for months  
they called the city every day

In Pleasant Grove a veteran stops to ask why  
we are taking pictures he is missing teeth  
cleans the walk for his older neighbors  
while he was snowblowing someone shot at him  
we're in a war down here he says

later I hear he died of cancer and left his house  
to a friend

*—after Nin Andrews*

The cost of a thing depends on how much you have. One year I was so broke, I bought a bus for a \$5.00. I got it from the bus company at the dead bus garage. I was still pretty strapped so it only cost 78¢ to get it fixed. I gave hard-luck people a ride. Sometimes we went to the grocery store, and we could get a lot if we pooled our change. Salmon, lemons, oatmeal, dish soap—it all fit on the bus. Winter days we rented skates to figure-8 Lake Glacier, or we went to the movies and filled up the first and second row.

In one movie we saw Niagara Falls and someone said, we should go there. I knew once we left our city, things would be different—everyone paid the same no matter how much you had. So we gassed up the bus and packed broasted chickens, pies, coffee in thermoses, a real feast. We drove up with our new cameras. The other tourists had accents so we made up a fake country and started every word with “z” or “o.” We ate our picnic but the sky blackened as we crossed back over the Rainbow Bridge—a tornado was coming toward us, so we pulled up to a museum and ran inside.

The tornado missed us, but it hit the lot across town where Willie Nelson’s tour bus was parked. Willie was in the museum, too, and he asked where we were from. He’d heard of it and thought we had some great ideas. He needed a bus, and in the spirit of our town, he gave me a million dollars. I split the money up, and we bought some cars and headed home. We had to pay more for things after that. Chicken cost \$99, and it was \$320.50 to go to the movies. We went the same as before, and we still liked riding together. That fall we took another trip, chartered a bus all the way to Graceland.

The idea of a river. It’s ours,  
and it’s just passing through.  
We are blessed by this river  
that makes a valley of us,  
that takes our rain and gives it  
back. The old mills ran  
on this river, wheels turning grist,  
men turning steel. It’s time  
to bridge the past, dredge the poisons  
from our bed. Imagine  
fish and people in kayaks crossing  
the watershed, sunflowers and zucchini  
stemming out of raised gardens  
on the shore, spin of bikes and  
skateboards, rhythm and blues  
so echo and beautiful you rise up  
out of your lawn chair.  
Smell corn grilling, see kids  
watching herons and turtles,  
chalking the walking paths  
with their names. Our river  
carries its name, Mahoning,  
*salt lick*, oil slick—how many handfuls  
in a quarter million gallons?

\*In February, 2013, an injection well operator was charged with dumping up to 250,000 gallons of fracking waste in a tributary of the Mahoning River.

The maple's damp red  
rug on the lawn reflects  
in my neighbor's windows—  
for a second, I think it's fire.  
Despite the delayed chill,  
I put in clean storms,  
sharp after the mute  
of screens.

One Christmas morning  
in Buffalo the house  
was on fire across from  
my mother's, on her  
birthday. We watched  
the orange and steam,  
throb of trucks. Now  
the house hole is flush,  
a small black mouth.

We are a soft animal—  
shell-less—flammable  
sweater where wings  
should be. Too big to  
burrow, building fire's  
favorite meal. Maybe  
you fear the wind, swirl  
and whip that tinders,  
or the grinding ground  
shaking down bridges  
for cars. Or the river  
through the door like you  
invited it in. Our animal  
doesn't swim well with  
roofs. Our animal  
knows too much.

I layer leaves into my  
leaf bin. They are too  
beautiful. Maybe that's why  
I wonder about the old  
tree, if it's long from  
falling. The red leaves are  
dying, leaving sky  
in their wake.

When you suspend  
the planet's rings  
over orbits and solstices,  
add handles that don't  
connect. When you  
create cause and effect,  
turn the world until  
it rusts into place. When  
you weld knobs  
on the back, let feet  
be like the wheels  
of the expanding universe.  
When you say  
you are celebrating, melt  
initials onto the half moon,  
T.A.S.A., yours  
and a friend's. When a cosmos  
is too big to create  
by yourself, call it  
the modern world,  
and put it right  
outside—but never let it  
enter—Bliss.

doesn't echo yet, as it will after  
the movers load half a semi  
of books. Friends take the dusty  
canning jars emptied of spiced vinegar,  
stereo and clunky speakers,  
lumpy day bed a few of us slept on  
after long discussions over wine.

The office key is returned,  
penned-up articles recycled.  
In the linguist's new office,  
books in their shaft of sunlight.

What will echo, here,  
is the linguist's brisk steps,  
full bass laugh, pranks—  
whoever works that desk  
will seem strange there.  
The linguist will be the one  
who used to be here, wrote  
the textbook with its editions  
arriving year after year.

About your flat tire  
in the middle of Pennsylvania,

and who left jagged metal  
there? I'm saving up news,

going out to pull Rose  
of Sharon saplings

in rain. You'd put a stop  
to that. Everyone is crazy

here with politics. I am too,  
but I'm sick of the name calling.

Come back on your new tire,  
your windshield rinsed clean

in the Delaware Water Gap.  
Tell me how it was there

in not-home. Come back  
wearing your magenta shirt,

your penumbra. I miss  
our Cambrian dreams.

Sixty years and a curtain between them. Nikki's fevers fall and rise,  
emphysema chokes Frances, techs in scrubs move out and in

with instruments. Nikki says, *My middle name is Frances*, learns  
to connect the oxygen tube, untangle cords. After a gray meal,

cracker party. Nikki pushes her I.V. into the hall, *I'm going  
to walk the dog!* and lily in her teeth, *Frances, I love your open-back  
gown.*

They part the curtain during sunset, tell stories about bats  
and step-mothers. Nikki tears a hunk from her crossword book,

Frances bends over her tray to work it, gown dipping off  
her shoulder, says, *Never smoke.* Nikki leaves four lilies.

hasn't mown since daisies  
bloomed in the yard.  
Suckers from an apple tree  
hide the deep porch, the house  
sitter drinks coffee in green  
seclusion. The wild cat's wound  
is healing, she comes for food,  
takes a soft voice but no touch.  
Long-legged boys dribbling  
a basketball down pink sports drinks.  
The small professor and her big dog  
hurry by, past radio jazz  
and smells of chicken and garlic.  
The house sitter's fingers stain  
with dark cherries, book turned  
on its spine by the kicked-off covers.  
The silent phone and empty mailbox  
keep company with the cold  
and folded computer, walking  
shoes damp with sweat, open  
window, deep vase, recipe box,  
small pile of heart stones.

The party theme is idioms so I pocket a toy block. We arrive late and every counter is crowded with coconut bars, pizza, eggs on the half shell that look like eyeballs with green olive pupils, lying on red squiggly pasta brains. *Are you Left Holding the Bag?* I ask Luke. He fishes out a pair of dentures, clenched shut with green duct tape, a fresh shell poking out between them. *I'm Biting the Bullet*, he says. Bats in the Belfry asks me about my costume. I hold up my prop. *Writer's block is not an idiom*, she says. *Then I'll take the cake*, I counter. Penny For Your Thoughts says, *Eat dessert first*. Chalk and Cheese walk in. They're British. We have to look it up.

The TV is hooked to an extension cord in the driveway, and Dressed to the Nines, Two Peas in a Pod, and Tears Before Bedtime are watching the Cleveland Indians rack up runs in the championship game. A fire burns in the firebowl, even though the night is freakishly warm. Bored to Deaths stride in with a board on their shoulders, skeleton faces. Three Sheets to the Wind pours us drinks with sparkling wine and violet liqueur, like drinking fragrance. Bite the Bullet tells us he feels awkward at parties, never knows what to say. Half Bored to Death is a good listener. I keep missing Mike, who died so quickly in June. He'd be Chicken in Every Pot, a big social justice guy. Or maybe Role Model, brown pillow/bun in fishnet stockings.

The host, Cat Out of the Bag, gives us ballots. We know Bats in the Belfry will win, even though she knocked over the pizza and left her belfry on a chair. You should have seen her a few years ago as Phyllis Diller. I vote for Three Sheets to the Wind, who looks a bit like Westward Expansion. *To me, Halloween's a spectator sport*, I tell Raining Cats and Dogs. *But look at my tattered dress*, I say. *I'm Cinder Block*. Artist's Block holds his arm out, pointing toward home. *I'm Eastern Bloc*, he tells me. When we leave, we take the cake plate, empty.

Thought and deed, stud and beam, this house  
is now mine. Boxes I've saved will stay stacked

since I'm already in, a few years now, and staying.  
The light-rich bedroom my winter office, painted

kitchen table my desk. Under my feet, crimson rug  
from friends' estate sale. Roofers bang up new shingles

outside my window, slip on sudden snow. I miss  
the clean slate I never saw, 1930 cedar shakes.

I'm old for a new beginning. Or at least I didn't  
see it coming. Maybe Youngstown feels that way, too.

Red-streaked Dutch tulips are a few inches up.  
The thoughtful roofers covered the garden

with plywood, blue tarps. We are all living temporary  
lives, my friend tells me. She never unpacks—

half the year with her husband in Michigan,  
emailing her students in Texas.