The Fight to Save the Town (book manuscript, forthcoming 2020)

ABSTRACT: Busted musical instruments don’t play well. Cracked cellos, flutes missing keys, violins without tailpieces to tie their strings: they can’t deliver notes on time, on rhythm, or at all. Somehow, nonetheless, an art museum and a composer managed to write a score for a band of damaged instruments collected from closets across the Philadelphia public schools. This “Symphony for a Broken Orchestra” was performed by school children and musicians in December, 2017. It was creative, chaotic, and oddly beautiful. The point of the work was not to celebrate exceptional, against-the-odds beauty for its own sake, as if it might be just as well for the instruments to be this way. The point was to make people care about the music students and teachers of the city’s public schools. It was to raise money to give them instruments that work. “If you think about it,” said composer David Lang, gesturing to a room full of damaged instruments, “this is a thousand children who could have music in their lives.”

This book is not about Philly or music. It’s not even about public schools. But in its way, it is telling the stories of other symphonies for broken orchestras. The broken part is our local public services in very poor areas that once relied on industrial jobs. Forty years after the taxpayer rights revolution began slashing local government revenues, these poor cities and counties have run out of services to cut, property to sell, bills to defer, and high-risk loans to take. They are now a test case for Grover Norquist’s famous line: “I don’t want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.” What we have learned is this: It is not just the government that we are drowning.

Yet something else is equally true. In some of our poorest post-industrial places, something beautiful is being made from something broken. May these stories restore our will for repair.