

FIFTY YEARS OF STACKING CHAIRS

I fold two and carry one in each hand
between the small groups of people still talking
although most have left the room. I lean the chairs
on ones already upright against a wall
or lower them atop a horizontal pile.

Two of these chairs at a time
are easily manageable, so back at the empty rows
I fold three and haul them with both hands
across the space. Next trip I try
four: fingers on each hand curved
under the metal backrests of
two chairs. Fifty years

of unstacking and arranging them: centre aisle
or not? Straight lines or semicircle?
Then clearing them. Anti-war event,
community protest meeting, union meeting,
address by a notable or activist figure
in a cause I endorse, or by a novice
or veteran writer, or panel involving
three speakers. Fractious debates, or
readings or talks I can hardly stay awake through
—chair after chair after chair:
my twenties, forties, seventies. Other volunteers,

fellow members, friends of friends helping,
and now the tables used by the presenters
at the front, or to collect tickets at the door,
must be tilted on one edge, the slide that locks the legs
released, and these flattened against
the table's underside before two of us hoist it
toward a storage closet. Or if the tables
don't weigh more than I can cope with,

I grasp one of the metal rails underneath
that secure the top, elevate it from the floor myself
and walk. The heavy risers, though,
which formed the temporary stage
must be detached from each other,
then two of us position a riser vertically,
one-two-three heave
and we're bearing it toward a cart
that is eventually filled, pushed
toward a storeroom.

When I began
I imagined a young person would appear
decades later, take the chair out of my hand:
"Here, let me. You've done enough." Instead,
people assemble as ever, but with fewer twenty-year-olds
each year, though the reasons
to set out chairs are the same: permanent war,
social injuries committed
or threatened, a chance to listen
to gnarly or astonishing words, ones that challenge
or sing, my hair grey now
as metal chairs to shut
at the close,
lift away.