

# What to Keep and What to Throw Away

## Mary Chapin Carpenter

These are your instructions  
Should you choose to follow  
Sit down with pen and paper  
Begin with something hollow  
Like the past words he offered  
A kind of explanation  
They only take up space here  
You do not need to save them  
Open up the closet  
Find his winter coat there  
Check inside the pockets  
Find a crumpled note there  
It says, "Milk and Sunday paper"  
And a heart smudged in blue ink  
Fold it up and box it  
Before you have time to think  
Sundays are the hardest  
Avoid familiar back roads  
Erase the old phone numbers  
Delete all the photos  
Those you haven't heard from  
Will come as no surprise  
They made their calculation  
When they chose a side  
These are your instructions  
When you become reclusive  
And old friends say they miss you  
And sleep becomes elusive  
Fill up every journal  
Empty every shoebox  
Burn the lists and letters  
Sweep out all the old thoughts  
Shake off all the covers  
Throw every window open  
Stand here in your bare feet  
Welcome in the morning  
These are your instructions  
When grace has left you stranded  
When you are lost and wounded

Bleeding and abandoned  
Use a tourniquet for pressure  
Let time do its healing  
Say prayers for good measure  
When you think you've lost all feeling  
Walk into the guest room  
The last place he was sleeping  
See the outline on the pillow  
Smooth it without weeping  
One last final walk-through  
Now move the bags and boxes  
From front porch onto back seat  
Pile away the losses  
These are your instructions  
If you choose to follow  
Stop and take a big breath  
Begin with something hollow

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