

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 last words that he offered
No 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've time to think

Sundays are the hardest
Avoid familiar back roads
Erase the old phone numbers
Delete all the photos
And 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
When old friends say they miss you
When 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 it's healing
Say prayers for good measure
When you think you've lost all feeling
Now 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
Haul away the losses
These are your instructions

If you choose to follow
Stop and take a big breath
Begin with something hollow...