

## How to Save Your Self

First you must pack up all  
your madneses, from noon's pink  
nightgown to evening's vulnerable confusions,  
from the green silk of drink and pills,  
to fear's dark black compulsions. Shove  
their angry coils into a sturdy army surplus bag,  
slide its zippered teeth shut on the banging  
of your lost souls.

They'll escape, they always do.  
So ignore them when they intrude  
on your ordered days. Keep your face calm  
as a swollen lake, a placid mirror, a surface  
that hides so much. They will rise through  
the bamboo floor, seat themselves in the oak  
dining chairs. They'll bang against the stovepipe,  
a trapped starling frantically trying to get out,  
they'll pummel the door like a frustrated child,  
they'll wail, *You think you're free? You think  
the wind outside is a mild breeze?*

Focus on the coming storm. Notice  
the drops of rain already spattering.  
You'll have to move quickly,  
you'll have to decide who to save.  
You can't keep hoarding them; you  
can't keep loving them. You must  
go to the basement, find the room  
with the treasured candlesticks,  
the generations of photos, your cow  
figurines, your treasures,  
and your duffel bag.

Carry it to the pond behind the house,  
wait until the last of the summer geese  
has left, listen for the evening killdeer,  
watch for the yellow black belly of this  
year's watersnake, and when the bullfrogs  
start their mournful bellow, and the fireflies  
began their luminescence, you must drown  
all but one. Choose carefully  
which madness you keep  
for it will be the only one  
you have to battle loneliness, to walk

with late at night when the full moon hangs  
so heavy, when your heart is tired,  
when you want some reminder  
of all that raged within.

## Envelope

To enclose, to hold, to wrap  
around. To cradle delicately, gently,  
securely. To seal for safe transport,  
to shelter the message, the words  
sent far away, where they would travel  
for days, through the post offices of Champaign,  
and Carbondale, and Des Moines, bumping  
in the back of dusty trucks, falling  
away from our fingers, full  
of intent. Submissions sent to the west,  
and the east, to the editors, to the journals,  
to those cities we had read of.  
How we believed in sending the message,  
loudly and hopefully, into the big,  
bigger beyond us. Such dreams  
penned in those writings. Our landscape  
one of envelopes, and typewriters, and stamps,  
and return address ink pads.  
How we tried to speed it all up,  
now we long for the slowing down,  
so typical. The nostalgia, the remembrance,  
the loving only after it is gone.  
The image of my lonely typewriter in the plane's  
overhead compartment—its keys hot  
with those early poems of love,  
and escape.

## Those That Come Back

We are uneventful here, we who have returned:  
the dutiful, the wounded, the living, the good,  
the adult child. You may call us  
by different names, but identify us  
by the depth, the strength of our return.  
Now back, we are forever here,  
as rooted as the oaks and pines.  
You can tell us by our patience,  
the long lines of waiting in our face,  
the settled air around us, the settled dust  
within our homes. You can tell us  
by our affinity for the winter night,  
whose muffled layers soothe our memories  
of other lives. We love the glazed, still  
surfaces of our backfield ponds.  
And yet, we try to make life  
happen, to break this thick block ice  
insulating us, but all we get are sharp rib pains,  
labored breath, billowing across  
the frozen fields.

Shades of summer birds haunt the pond;  
their shadows brush the ghosts of former lives,  
selves we buried so relentlessly. They've dug  
themselves up, and dance just out of reach---  
mocking...*All that you could have been...*  
The other dead faded dreams would gather,  
if they could, but they are trapped  
still in their dank burial boxes,  
weighted by sadness, love. Patiently,  
they suffocate beneath the layers  
of perpetual snow. So much lost along the way.  
So much accepted, so much ground  
down with the season. The drying husks,  
the composting. Fat black tadpoles move  
sluggishly below the pond's ice. My life  
barely moves within these bundled layers.  
The years accumulate. The woodpile grows.  
This winter bears down on us all.  
Our houses weaken, the rafters shift,  
mice grow bold in the hallways and shower,  
the paint peels, and the windows loosen.

And, oh, how our parents dwindle.  
They are beginning to look like distant  
children, peering at the brutal landscape  
fast approaching. Their tracks in the snow  
grow lighter, footprints  
smudged and rising.

Beating the Boundaries

*"Land marked the body; the body marked the land."*  
--from my grandfather's journal

You have asked and asked again,  
beating nightly at my door. Clenched  
fist, raised hand, questioning, insistent--  
Why did I leave? Look at my eyes:  
corn-yellow, barn-brown, irises shot  
through with dust. How can you believe  
I've succeeded? In this city I exhale  
your landscape, my breath misty and fogged, hair  
tangled, a bale of hay. I've left, and I've  
left myself behind.

My great-grandfather slammed my  
grandfather's palms against the farm's  
border: rock, oak, post--slammed until his  
blood smeared across barren stone, seeped  
into old wood. Three months for his hands  
to heal. My fingers are calloused,  
lightly, at the tips. Still, I've memorized: *This*  
*is the northwest corner, the granite rock.*  
*This is the southwest, the upright row of*  
*devil's walking sticks.*

In sleep I walk deep in your  
interior where pollen drifts  
like rain, and creeks swirl with the quick silver  
tails of minnows. I step into  
your rivers, your limerock streams, clay banks.  
Who says geography is the soul?  
I know the answer: each time returning,  
I return with nothing more than the dust  
in a drowned man's pockets. I am that dust,  
scattering, then lost.