

1983

Doctrine of the Hands

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Recommended Citation

McKain, David. "Doctrine of the Hands." *The Iowa Review* 13.3 (1982): 29-29. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2928>

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Doctrine of the Hands · *David McKain*

My fingers are long and thin.
I lug flatrock from the river.
I wear graycloth and leather,
the gauntlet gloves of a falconer.

On the retaining wall I build, I watch
a snake flick its tongue at the wind,
its blue head tipped and frozen hard
as flint, a shim for wedge and balance.

For three days and three nights,
if you never let it out of sight,
the steel eyes of the hawk oxidize;
they hood themselves in submission.

If you climb the highest pine,
you would see miles of ancient walls
with galaxies of lichen; like any ruin,
a civilization—a secret and a lie.

All through these woods black slaves
cleared the land for home and pasture;
miles east of the Connecticut River,
they dug and split the stone by hand.

I tell people about Swamp Yankees
with slaves and hooded hawks, lichen,
and the Long Tidal River. I am proud
my hands are hard and swollen.

At the end of the day I own new words:
stone boat and *mica*, *schist* and *crowbar*.
I cut meat at the table, my elbows wider;
the bone knife smaller inside my fist.