

Correspondence · *James McKean*

He finds his place
in Professor Cody's mail-order
rules of punctuation,
licks his pencil as if it needs
to be oiled, and writes, "Dear Jim,"
then nothing for a long time.

Behind him my mother looks up
from her boiling kettle and tells him
to mention clean clothes
and three squares a day. But this
is his letter. He writes,
"Hope your thumb is better,"
knowing it has been for years.

My aim is no better now
than the time he stood over me,
the wood and my thumb hammered,
and he whispered, "Think, think,"
and tapped my forehead to pound
the message home. When I asked
if thinking was like seeing
in the dark, he said nothing.
"The birds have robbed us blind,"
he writes. "The Cascades are clear."

There's too much paper left.
He fidgets in his chair. Maybe
his back aches from these
ten minutes of nonuse or my mother
looks over his shoulder
and he remembers my voice
on the far side of his newspaper,
"Dad, dad. . . ." Then her yelling
from the kitchen, "He's talking to you!"

He writes, "\$10 enclosed for laundry,"
and licking the pencil one more time,
signs, "Love your father,"
the comma left out on purpose
and the last word started
like a ten penny nail,
with three quick strokes driven home.