Autumn, 1830. Her Letter to Dead

James. Since last
the seasons have changed
the farm. The magpies
take to the peppers, the wild
cats fatten with field mice and feed
from the barn. My strawberries
are spreading
with such felicity!
The drought coughed up its last
windstorm some two months ago
and you know
we do not have to dust the china
every day. This moment, Margaret my sister
coughs from a real cold—
no hacking now from the dreadful summer
mote.

The modest bears promise:
our winter crop is planted
and all
that remains is the watching, mounds
curled to the walnut tree. I marvel
at them whenever: from the kitchen window
washing dishes, cooking, from the bedroom
sewing the infinity quilt
(yes, still! still!).

Often we both find
ourselves staring from these back windows,
studying the completeness
of rain.
A stranger might think we seemed satisfied,
nothing more, hopes stammering
beneath the bleak white sky.

Conversation

is elemental.
(O in spring we talk like children.
Do you remember the river

coming to pieces

that April—how long ago! — the Lawson child
riding ice like a pony till the spile broke
his gallop.

What kept us off? You often
wonder, no? I think I’d wanted you to kiss me,
James. Yes, I’d wanted

and I plotted us

from walking out there. Love is luck,
as my mother would say. Of course we were young
and despite the wind blowing in my heart, you
never did.

Ever. Margaret says
the child’s face was frozen in a smile,

that

his father’s tears did sizzle on his cheek.)
I don’t know why

I write. This letter

will end in a fine ash, yet

you must have this scene:

no rain, but a wind

herds the fallen

leaves across an acre
to the east fence where they pile
in an ochre line, jumping among themselves.
Again I think of you, grown,

riding

on your tall horse while I watched

the day you plowed the culvert to bits

and your old father came running

like a madman.
Your blank visage
did not compromise his leap to your seat, nor
the shove he gave you to the ground. I will
never forget his wicked turn
from the culvert, James,
nor the awful punch
up side your head to send you sprawling
again. I hated him.

And I tell you this: I
was angry at you, we were not children, and
I was angry because you would not rise.
Such submission!

Forgive me. But you are gone

and I must tell you (yes, I am guilty
of lying!) how I loved
you, how I could not at all
love you after this,
such drought! And
to think you were the best
of men. Now

Margaret calls. An image of winter
hones her voice: we are chopping
wood, and it is my

turn.