Becoming a Miser

James Langlas
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Suddenly the world stops turning.
And every crack in the ground collapses
within itself. Tiny pieces of bark fall
from the trunks of trees, tumbling
upon each other at odd angles,
causing the birds overhead to circle
again, look out of one eye,
and fly toward something secure,
an old nesting place
or the sturdy branch above
the river, where the wind
is always from the east.

It is this way with so much.
My mother used to speak of an uncle
who wore only one pair of suspenders,
the same pair to work and to church,
who drove his sputtering truck
on empty, for miles,
to sell his dead wife’s shoes.
And there was the lady down the block
who had keys for everything:
the garage, the cupboards,
the heavy drawers in her dresser.
In the end she couldn’t escape
from her own house.
The smoke had crept up
from the basement and turned the locks
inside out
while she slept.

You, too, have seen it all happen,
the smallest things turning on themselves,
leaving you with your arms extended,
your eyes on the ground, looking
for a footprint, a single leaf,
a broken twig.
And finally you tuck your hands
in your pockets and move toward
the open field, searching
for the pile of rough stones
someone else has assembled
and forgotten.

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