

JUST BEFORE

Jim Knowles

There is a certain silence when
a layoff is imminent in the office,
like that thick empty moment
when a hammer swings down.

People disappear into big rooms,
unannounced. Meetings are cancelled,
mail replies dangle on and on.

There is nothing normalizing in the air.
No sweet ozone from the printers.
No chatter.
No ticking, milling snack machines.
No wrenching regurgitation
from the coffee flasks.

Just the low rumble and whoosh
of the cooling system, and a distant hum
of cars out on the highway, like muffled bees.

Then something happens.
A clearing throat, an opening door,
fast-walking slacks, rustling papers.

Then the rasp of cardboard boxes
being put together all around,
as the newly-severed struggle
with the shock,
the years, the roads washed out,
while jamming tabs in slots,
voiceless but noisy, as though
the dying were told
to build their own coffins.