

NIGHT SHIFT: *Minneapolis Welding Rod*

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The air never quits
moving: It is white flux,
the white flux that bakes
hard on the wire passing

through these ovens, the white flux
that sleeps in our skins and doesn't
stop burning. Sometimes
I place one of these rods

diagonally across the track
and watch the others tumble
from the line. The machine chews
them until it breaks down.

But the air never quits
moving, growing out of nothing
as it re-arranges itself
and turns everything

to heat, a slow heat
pressing against my body,
persistent as the weeds that twist
through the alley and clutch gravel.

I imagine how the air drifts off
beyond these painted windows,
turning black in the mouths
of women who no longer see

their toes as they sway in the buses;
or how it dies into a cup
of ashes, unmoved by the stain
on someone's hand.

I can do anything
when the machine stops. I can
take off these goggles
and feel my eyes pulsing

against their lids.
I can clean the jar that I keep
by the scale and spit into
each time the flux sticks

in my throat, each time
I pack twenty-five pounds
of welding rods in a box
and slam them down the conveyor

and hear the dry voices of metal
spinning. It seems enough
to stand here all night
and think of myself as liquid

shrinking in a glass or to walk
past the giant spool, growing
mad as it unravels its wire,
past the blade that falls

each second and never
becomes dull, the cut
wires drumming iron,
through the storeroom where no one is,

where the black bugs startle
and lose themselves in the bins,
where no patterns emerge from the dust
and I move toward the alley

outside the loading dock, toward the sound
of breath—in a place where snow
rises and reddens
blowing away its light.