

NIGHT SHIFT: *Minneapolis Welding Rod*

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*Jeff Friedman*

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.