Night Shift: Minneapolis Welding Rod

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.