

90°

for Bud Fisher

First job, first day: I'm with Javier
bottling nail polish remover

in a beauty supply factory.
Javier has to piss, but won't go.

It feels like I'm bleeding flames, he says.
On break, he asks me if I want to

get high, if I can front him ten bucks
until payday. Javier's my boss.

I'm sixteen. Never had a payday
or the clap. Javier's married. He's

afraid he spread the flames to his wife.
Around us, rusted, windowless walls

cough forklift exhaust and peroxide,
cough bleach, acetone, silkscreener's ink.

I scored the job through a ministry
aimed at helping kids out of the hood,

at getting us work experience
so we knew why we should stay in school.

My friend Bud's here, too, making boxes.
At lunch he'll school Javier in hoops

and get fired for it. *Bud* as in
Budweiser, his dad's beer, white cans

that Javier and Darrell knock back
before they light up a blunt. Darrell

handles the forklift and loads boxes
all day into the empty bellies

of trucks he never sees the fronts of.
I never see him without headphones

to block out the sound or funnel it in.
Before Javier hires Bud back,

he calls Bud's mom a parade of names.
Before we started, that ministry

put Bud and me and a bunch of kids
through an interview class: how to dress,

how to bend our elbows exactly
ninety degrees before we shook hands.

No less or you'll look needy, the guy
said. *Any more is too far away.*

What a bunch of bullshit, I can hear
Javier telling that guy. *Go ask*

your mother how her angle's doing.
Or better yet, go ask Bud's mother.

Watch out: She set my junk on fire.
All summer Bud and I groan and sweat

and fill boxes for minimum wage.
We answer when Javier's wife calls

and say he's on a delivery
when he's really out back with his girl.

We learn a bunch about measurements
that summer—pallet capacity,

truck volume—learn that Javier's wife
can run a sub-6-minute mile

and that Javier's only real marriage
is to lies. We start seeing ninety

degrees everywhere—forklift to truck,
punch card to time clock, 50-gallon

steel drum to the always-slick shop floor—
how just a few degrees either way

and any curious spark would mean
all of us bleeding serious flames.