

**First Day, Container Corporation of America,
June 1972**

When the bleak break-room smokers asked,
“What you run?” I answered “the half
and quarter mile,” to which response

they burst in furious, gut-clutching
yucks and howls. “No, boy,” one said,
“what *machine* you run?” and I got it.

Both the joke I’d innocently made
and the joke I was: high-school-Harry
among the balding, unionized sublime.

“Slitter 66,” I said, and their blue
ballooning guffaw burst in rarefied air,
everyone exhaling Lucky Strike at once.

Eighteen, big-haired and mutton-chopped,
brand new black pocket tee taut over
my still tight gut, I thought they saw

the future in me and shuddered
at their vision. Or was it their past,
themselves before the war to save

democracy—resplendent in white shirt
and dungarees—now pot-bellied and shot?
The young think things like that.

How could I know the guy whose job I took
came home boxed from Vietnam,
a war I fought in TV news clips

and the peace marches of us blessed
with high draft numbers? I ate alone:
mother’s cold meat loaf, bruised banana,

a Coke that gave me the jitters.
When the horn burped, I lit out for work
like the apple polisher I’d planned to be,

though not before those men
who’d seemed too gray had heaved me
in a tin bin of cardboard scrap

and slammed the lid, their fists beating
rhythm to the heart thumping my throat.
Whatever republic we were then,

its pulse beat among us,
though no one would say
the word. Sprawled headfirst

among mis-cuts and discards,
the dross of a process I'd yet
to learn—man, this was a start.

Stein, Kevin. *Chance Ransom*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000.