

First Job

By Joseph Campana

All evening I hunted

the bird that wanted

a cage of glass,

here where cemetery

slides into creek, fronting

what was once the largest

indoor leather mill in the world.

There the skins gathered

for cleansing, coloring,

scraping, shipping off.

It closed three years after

a lone sparrow set up camp

behind the only desk

in the only full-serve

service station left in town

where, from four to seven

nightly one summer,

I blackened the pages

of books with my thumbs.

Whatever it sought there—
thumping its frightened body
against glass, into cabinets
or out to the bays
scrubbed raw with gasoline
where the broken waited
to be raised up, hosed off,
fastened together in hope
of coughing to life again—
whatever it sought was not a dollar
slipped through a window cracked
because patronage was right
for the aging ladies of August to provide
from Chryslers cool in the sun.

There was nothing to be found

in books or boxes of parts.

And the tools hanging from pegs

were as useless as my hands,

which could not patch together

those straggling conveyances

any more than I could

with a tattered broom

batter the bird to freedom

as I swung at fluttering terror

as I sought with useless devices

some fortune reposed

in corners of grease and dust.

Source: Poetry (Poetry Foundation, 2002)