

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)



Poet and Renaissance Literature scholar Joseph Campana spent his childhood in the Adirondack foothills of Johnstown, New York. A poet and scholar who has published essays on Spenser, Shakespeare, early modern poetics, and the history of sexuality, Campana is a regular contributor to the Kenyon Review's blog. Campana holds a BA from Williams College, MA degrees in English Literature from both University of Sussex and Cornell University, and a PhD in English Literature, also from Cornell University.

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