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)