**For the Sparrow Off Alvear and Elcano**

Courtney Justus

You found it swaying on spindly little feet, baby sparrow

fallen from the tree. You swaddled it in your T-shirt, baring

your smooth back, olive skin, Gothic letter tattoo wing-like,

stretching between shoulder blades, words for a friend taken flight.

You asked no questions, not where did it come from or

where is its mother, only said pichón, baby bird, and it was

calm, like it had been waiting for your hands all along.

My tongue was dry as a nest, a sandpaper lizard, your mouth

a cave I dreamt for months. My indigo dress spread across

dry grass, your ankles crossed over the treble clef tattoo, voices

counting quarter notes on torn paper. We chopped off our hair,

sipped unsweetened *mate* cocido, sang in the heat, walked until

blisters were an afterthought. I later returned without shame

to my uncle’s house, borrowed bed overlooking the orange trees,

birds chirping in their eaves, my head frothing with mateína,

with *let’s talk about this*, remembering your hand fluttering

by my waist, the bird you held, our bird, the woman you wanted

to love who loved birds. My red suitcase at the ready and heavy

with books, none about birds but some about girls as tender-footed

and curious as her. Dishwater blonde curls, shy smile, floral dresses

at family lunches. You rescued a bird with her, its name blown

to some riverside tree, and after its cage broke you set it free.

Even after you chose her, you still chose me.