

## Resolve

*Marilyn Nielson*

*One bird often whistled the notes, not the words, of the beginning of Swanee River—"Way down upon the Swa . . ."—without ever feeling inclined to add ". . . nee River," even after hearing the whole phrase practiced hundreds of times on the piano.*

—"Why You Can't Teach a Starling to Sing," David Rothenberg

"The music keeps going and never stops,"  
I tell my son—"Until the bar line?"  
Of course, until the bar line.  
He moves his fingers into place with effort,  
As if moving in the third person;  
As if they are thin sausages on sticks.

I tell him the story about Mozart slipping  
Out of bed, darting downstairs, unable  
To let a truncated cadence dangle  
And suffocate, incomplete, in the air. "How  
do you know when it is finished?" he asks,  
and I play the changes, those deliberate roads.

In the mornings, above my bed, the insistent wrong  
Of his notes buzzes like a trapped fly.  
*Slower!* I croak, or *And again!* The generations  
Coalesce into singularity: a chorus of mothers  
And correction, layered like paired mirrors  
Around this moment, this music, these words.

The years slip off in sheets, whispering.  
In the practice room, I would close my eyes  
To better place the music, and awaken later,  
Having descended through a jangling  
Sleep, head on the fallboard, breathing  
In and out the slices of surrounding song.

“It’s more than theory,” my teacher said.  
“It’s doctrine. Listen—” and he played us through  
Fields and rivers, one light shining starlike  
Down the long path, and at last the open door.  
“Without the dominant,” he told us,  
“Nothing can go home.”

My own practice comes in pieces now, or in the cocoon  
Of night, as I progress through phrases—interrupted,  
Always interrupted. At the broken cadence, no one  
comes running to resolve. For now, fragments of chord  
Move haltingly, waiting for the dominant, looking  
for the road home, knowing they are not enough,  
Themselves.