

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

Emily Dickinson

Composer's Note

During my studies at the University of Connecticut, a starling had trapped itself inside one of the rehearsal halls. (An invasive species, yes, but I still find them beautiful!). While in class that day, knowing that no doors went directly outside, I had trouble focusing on anything but the bird's search for an exit. Once the hall had emptied after class, I first coaxed it into a small vestibule and, to the bird's fright, closed the door behind us.

Curiously, though, whether out of resignation or maybe some kind of cross-species understanding, the bird soon allowed me to pick it up without any panic. We calmly walked outside, I let go, and it flew off to perch in a nearby tree. I continue to regard this small victory as one of the most meaningful moments I've ever experienced with another being.

Emily Dickinson's text so humbly evokes a longing that many of us have felt as we search for purpose and for a way to offer some good to our terrestrial community. Through this longing, comfortingly, her sentiment conveys positivity: that making even one small gesture to help one fellow soul is enough to justify one's time spent in the world.

In my setting of this text, I attempt to capture a questioning individual's yearning to find their own faith in Dickinson's message. The first half of this piece ruminates over just the first four lines of text until, perhaps, a fortunate real-life encounter with a robin in need uplifts this individual by granting the same mental turning point that a starling once gave me.

– Matthew Swartz
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Duration: Approx. 5:30

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