



BACH AND THE BABY GRAND

For the *Prelude in C Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach, I lend Trina my right hand and right foot. Her right hand lies useless in her lap, fingers curling around an orb of air as if a sorcerer's curse had partially worked, turning one half to warm stone. Her right foot is locked in a brace and cannot bend to the pedal. Even Trina's words are weighed down, strewn across a debris-field of language.

There are still times when Trina is too appalled by grief to play the baby grand with me. For months after her accident and subsequent stroke, she assiduously avoided the piano, despite its commanding presence in the living room. It was as if its wires were vibrating the word *lost*—lost career, lost friends, lost abilities—under its closed lid. Casting about for some way she could continue to make music, I brought Trina an autoharp so she could strum while I pressed down the chords. Together we sang simple folk songs learned in our childhood that rose up from deep and undamaged wells of memory, overflowing the silence of aphasia. Finally, the day came when the autoharp needed to be tuned and I asked her to play the notes on the piano for me, starting with the low F and ending three octaves higher with C. With great reluctance, she sat down on the bench and placed one finger gently on an

ivory key as if touching the cheek of a comatose child. It was a beginning.

Now, a year later, it is early spring, though it is so cold and rainy outside it seems like winter. Alone in the warm house, we begin to play the *Prelude in C Minor* far more slowly than Bach intended but with great care, paying attention to fortissimo, pianissimo, diminuendo. The entire piece is one unresolved measure after another, the whole flowing like a rush of water, finding resolution only in the still pool of the last chord. It carries Trina along, *allegro con moto*, staccato on the third beat, giving her no place to rest, and buoying her up on the powerful notes of the bass clef. We let the metronome, which should be set at 120 beats per minute, sleep in its case; instead we synchronize our tempo to the slow drip of rain off the eaves, splattering onto the empty garden.

I wonder why Bach called this piece a prelude as if it led to something more. Perhaps he meant it to portend the future of young pianists for whom it was written. But for Trina, it is all she has—at least at this moment. We have tried to play the music of other composers (a simple piece by Beethoven took us weeks of struggle), but it is always Bach to whom we return. Some of his preludes are beginners' pieces worthy of a prodigy: fully formed; complex in their simplicity; mathematical but never formulaic. Their polyphonics provide the buoyancy of melody to Trina's left hand. Their counterpoint enables her fingers to answer mine. Within bounds, Bach's preludes are boundless.

Sometimes Trina suspects that I play with her solely out of sympathy. She does not accuse me of it with words, although she attempts to, but with a raised eyebrow or a sigh. Last year, before we switched from autoharp to piano, she tried to give me her baby grand, pointing to it and then to me repeatedly, almost desperately, until I understood and refused. The truth is that I love to play with her, not because we are any good or ever will be, but because we take the time to wonder at the music,