

KIT PEPPER

Bach's Dance

(for Glen)

Each piece remembers us perfectly—Anne Michaels

Have you ever had a story told to you
that in the moment of its telling
is too full of something to be
questioned or interrupted?
And then after, wished you had,
wished you had asked a few questions,
for a few more details.

It was like this during my last piano lesson,
a week before my teacher died: his telling
the story of a lone fiddler who stopped
sniper fire. From some bombed-out
building this fiddler played Bach's *Bourée in G*
and both sides took the guns from their shoulders,
their hands from the guns and then,
when the fiddler finished, clapped and clapped
till the fiddler played again.

In truth, I'm not sure the gunmen
really kept clapping or that the fiddler
played on and on, but this is how
I imagine it, how the story has taken shape
in my mind. I didn't ask my piano teacher
who the soldiers were, who it was
who played the *Bourée*, how he himself
came to know this story
when in all these years I've not been able
to find it in any book, from any other teacher.
Instead, we talked about dynamics and touch—

things that release notes from measures of a score,
squeeze melody in behind rubble, toppled doors.
That afternoon, working through Bach's *Bourée*
my piano teacher and I believed
music could stop death. An oath
I still believe, even when, for reasons
smaller than a grace note, people die.
When Bach learned his first wife and son
had died in childbirth he prayed
that his music not abandon him. The death
that music stops is a bigger death than
this or that particular dying. The soldiers in
my piano teacher's story, never died,
instead they put down their guns and listened.