



MOTH HOUR  
ANNE KENNEDY

## FOREWORD

On Guy Fawkes night, 1973, my brother Philip was partying on a hillside section in Wellington when he accidentally fell to his death. He was twenty-two. He had been a reader, a talker, an epileptic, a history-buff, an alcoholic, a political apologist with a short fuse, and a poet.

The family didn't know what to do about grief. The noisy house went silent. I was fourteen. I lay on the red rug in the sitting room and listened to Beethoven's *Thirty-Three Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli*, op. 120 – over and over, because it was there. (Our uncle had died the year before, and his classical record collection had been added to the house soundtrack of rock and pop.) Over six months, I listened to how the waltz transformed into things that were funny, sad, outrageous, and in the end, epic. Beethoven had gone on a tour of his musical influences – Ludwig van Beethoven, *This is Your Life*.

There were seven siblings. Philip was in the middle. I was the youngest. Peter is the closest in age to Philip and the one who nicknamed him 'Moth' as a child – perhaps because he was quick and annoying and cast a shadow. A few weeks after the death, Peter brought Philip's things to the family house at Island Bay. In the big, light bunk room they had shared as children, he shuffled books onto the white school-woodwork bookcase as if returning them to their tūrangawaewae.

Over the next couple of years, I read these books. They'd been culled. I knew that because I remembered what had been there before Philip moved out of home, and because there was nothing he liked better than a rave about books. There was no Bertrand Russell, no Beat poets, no American School, no Zukofsky, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot or Sylvia Plath. There was no Dylan Thomas, whom Philip loved so much as a teen that he tried to be Dylan Thomas by drinking a lot – then suddenly, like a misguided affair, went off him. No Yeats (his 'moth-hour of eve'), no Shelley, no Walter Benjamin. There was: James K. Baxter, Günter Grass, Brendan Behan, Timothy Leary, Herman Hesse, a French dictionary, a Kafka novella about a creature you might put in a jar, *The Book of Changes*, and a much-pencilled edition of *The Book of Tea*.

Also on Philip's bookcase: a manila envelope containing a manuscript of poems typed in Courier on thick, cream, letter-sized paper.

The following variations riff (like Beethoven) off one of Philip's poems.

## THE *THEME*

Come catch me little child  
and put me in a jar.

Place inside:

some leaves (for me to eat)  
*The Book of Tea* (for me to read)  
some paper,  
    any paper  
and a pen (for me to write)

Screw on the top,  
    little child,  
and put six airholes in the lid,  
then leave me on your windowsill.

Just one more thing,  
    little child,  
look through your sunset hair  
into my world  
before I die  
and collect your imaginary mind.

Philip Kennedy *c.* 1970

## THE TRANSFORMATIONS

1.

The thing in the jar  
always dies!

The rice cooker steams  
so the sun goes down

Deep in the house  
sepia gathers

The pencil has eaten  
the fragile book

2.

(for me to eat)

in the first place  
a gulp of air  
please give me  
the meaningful paper

(for me to read)

the spider's web  
at its centre  
a black dot  
the moon is setting

(for me to write)

a strange dream  
transformed  
in fuzzy pencil  
the lampshade ticks  
with moth bodies

(for me to walk)

the seam on a shirt  
the purple arteries  
of the city streets

(for me to want)

to know you always  
invisible thing  
throw three coins  
to find the changes

3.

catch me / if can  
think think / if can't

if can / a jar  
if not / an air

take my hand / if can  
if can't / second thoughts

in a garden / if there  
if not / a room

think think / if can  
if can't / dream

any dream / any jar  
any number / reasons

hold me / any me  
in the first place / if can

the second place / is  
the whole / fucking point

in a jar / if can  
if can't / imagine



5.

Some footsteps any footsteps  
some garden any garden  
jar any jar  
this jar

Some paper any paper  
a pen any pen  
room any room  
this room

Read some feed any feed  
drink wine any red  
laugh any laugh  
                    this rage

And if some body any body  
arch any back  
lift any belly  
                    but this sweat

At some party any party  
this crowd any dance  
witch any Sabbath  
                    but this death

6.

Tamarillos ornaments on the kitchen sill

all day red and all day warm

as touch

as factory

by the cool glass, the white paintwork

all the trouble begins.

7.

Coming down off the spine of the botanical gardens  
onto the green flank of the dragon, shadows arch

under my feet. In the dell below, the shell-shaped stage  
is strewn with red camellias. November

and across the valley on the dense dark Tinakori Hill  
houses begin to light up like Guy Fawkes.

At the top of Patanga Crescent the pared-down villa  
trembles with young men thinking,

pens lost in the wide sleeves of their dead uncles.  
They are ecstatic and do everything extravagantly

in the last light: read, drink, fuck.  
On the windowsill – a stone, leaf, a twig with buds,

and the black cat left behind mewling by the old lady  
now in the Home of Compassion. No change.

8.

They drink the contents of houses in the subdivisions  
a glittering view of the harbour while the Gatsby-dads

are up at the beach. The boys from Saint Pats town,  
where they raised them up and tore them down

like statues – the grey angles of their uniforms – who saw  
the spectre of the little nun collecting for the poor,

find they have a great love for the transubstantiating  
power of plenty. Their placards rest in the passage:

Stay Away LBJ. Sometimes they come down long enough  
to need drugs to sleep at night. Every so often

I meet a boomer who was at the party on the hill  
that night – a girl dancing barefoot in purple velvet

and flowers, off her face on the lawn –  
and she will tell me her version of the fall.

9.

Letter to Philip in Heaven or Hell or on the cloud  
of unknowing. We're still suspended here, as ever.

The kids – descendants of Irish peasants, like you are,  
Philip – on a sunny afternoon unearth black clods

from their laptops and are in love with the sudden light.  
They are in despair at the rottenness of the earth

and of governments. WTF. They're also, of course,  
of this earth, the great-great-grandchildren

of tohunga from Tai Tokerau, of Kai Tahu fisher folk.  
The boy sees his father some Mondays for a hamburger.

The girl walks the dog around Grey Lynn at sunset.  
Pray for them. But generally they are okay. Eileen

goes back to Otago, and Tem's friend Patu swings by  
in the evening and they share some beers and a game.

10.

In a jar on the sill

leaf and pen

a wild party

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*Moth Hour is an extraordinary work by one of our most original and gifted writers. Starting as a simple act of mourning and remembering, unfolding through multiple forms and voices, musical or vernacular, it swells into a moving celebration of art and the imagination. You will want to read it again and again.* – Elizabeth Caffin

*This is subtle, moving and ingenious writing, occupying the mind in patterns that form, dissolve and reform – like the shapes of grief itself.* – Tom Bishop

**ANNE KENNEDY** is a writer of fiction, screenplays and poetry. *Sing-Song* won Poetry Book of the Year at the 2004 Montana New Zealand Book Awards, *The Time of the Giants* was shortlisted for the same award in 2006, and *The Darling North* won the 2013 NZ Post Book Award for Poetry. Her novels include *The Last Days of the National Costume*, shortlisted for the NZ Post Book Award for Fiction in 2014, and *The Ice Shelf*, longlisted in the 2019 Ockham NZ Book Awards. She lives in Auckland.



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