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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
The new sun rushes
the dead trees
Your white breath moves
in and out of the lung duplex

I put my thoughts
on the Kingsland train
A family with boxes tumbles
in and out of the shaky real estate

At the edge of the lawn
a plastic letterbox
like a Venus flytrap
eats a letter from the courts

Apples plummet
from a split bag
the floor awash
with bruises and freedom

A child’s face
remembers the bedrooms
the released cat
fights its new neighbourhood

The garden path
leads to the garden
all roads
to the brother’s sunset
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.
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.
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.
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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