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A place to put these butterflies: finding form in *zuihitsu*

Abstract

The 1,000-year-old *Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (*Makura-no sōshi*) is a definitive example of the genre of Japanese literature known as *zuihitsu*—literally, ‘as the brush flows’. An autobiographical account of the cloistered world of a lady-in-waiting at the Emperor’s court in tenth-century Japan, this ground-breaking text comprises a fragmented ‘miscellany’ of loosely associated ideas, personal essays and lists. Beyond its singular importance as a historical record of daily life which is almost microscopic in its detail, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* endures to this day as a source of inspiration for writers, filmmakers and scholars interested in experimenting with narrative form. This paper offers a creative, scholarly examination of formal aspects of Shōnagon’s landmark *zuihitsu* in relation to my own creative nonfiction work, currently being undertaken as part of a PhD in creative writing at Griffith University. In particular, the fragmentation that is the *Pillow Book’s* defining feature, along with the associative linking techniques seen in many of the lists scattered throughout, have informed the structural interplay of the memoir material.

Biographical note:

Ingrid Woodrow is an Australian writer. She holds an MA (Writing) from the University of Queensland and will complete a PhD submission (Creative Writing) at Griffith University in 2018. Her novel, *Goddess and the Galaxy Boy* (2001) was shortlisted in the *Australian/Vogel* award. Her writing has been published in numerous national and international anthologies, journals and periodicals including *Meanjin*, *Journal of Australian Studies* and *Artlines*.

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I can't remember if it was the day bull sharks were spotted off the beach and everyone was ordered out of the water; or maybe it was the morning I drove past the river and saw a boy sitting on the rocks not ten metres from a crocodile warning sign, languidly drying himself off after a dip. Either way, there was no going swimming that day, so I'd found myself at the library instead, standing idly in front of a one-twelfth scale replica of a Queenslander-style house enclosed in a glass case like a museum relic. I studied it closely—meanly—for flaws in the scale, and could not fault it: the pegs on the clothesline, a brown glass bottle on the ground below the tank stand, a light switch, window hoods embellished with simple star patterns cut by hand from the sheet metal. It was eerie, uncanny in its detail: the colours, the shadows it cast, the long dry grass growing from the base of its tin-topped stumps. The accompanying plaque said the model was built by the husband of a woman who grew up in the house, then raised her own children there. It detailed how even a pair of red shoes she remembered hiding from her mother once, underneath a squatter's canvas-backed folding chair—a replica of which sat on the model's veranda—had been faithfully reproduced and included. I searched and could not see them, until finally they appeared, placed in the seat of the chair rather than underneath, as the plaque had said. I looked at the house for a long time and could not get enough of it—as if a real house had been shrunk down just so and captured behind glass like some exotic butterfly. I want to build a place like that, but all I have are scraps. Splinters.

The myriad past, it enters us and disappears. Except that within it, somewhere, like diamonds, exist the fragments that refuse to be consumed. Sifting through, if one dares, and collecting them, one discovers the true design. (Salter, 1967: 47)

(And when is a piece that resembles a fragment—really the whole?) (Hahn, 2006: 4)



Me in the matriarch's garden, six years old, in a dress the same colour as the storm lilies I loved. Amaryllis grew like weeds there, great clumps of them, as tall as me.

You can't see the farmhouse, built by my great great-grandfather, a Swedish shipbuilder, when his first son was a babe-in-arms—born on the banks of the Dee River, two hours north-east by bullock dray. A house whose weathered bones still stand in the centre of a wheatfield, a stone's throw from the family graveyard. Grandma took me to see the tombstones, but the place they called The Shack was forbidden: home only to a coterie of creatures that could cause me harm.

Wind sifting through the wheat heads like a sea breeze skimming water. Sun streaming through gaps in the clinker-built walls. Eaves hung with ancient webs, intricate crocheted silk. Brushing years of dust from the things that remain, carefully, the way

one brushes something from a face. Unearthing small treasures. A wooden box of lily bulbs, swaddled in newspaper; a card scrawled in child's handwriting.

Shards that cut deep, showing up like butterflies. Sometimes they come alone and sometimes they come in swarms but always I'm floundering there with the net, scrabbling for a pen and paper, trying to pin them down before they go. I need a place to put them, somewhere they can live and breathe. An enclosure, an architecture for this 'material that seems born without its own carapace' (Miller and Paola, 20112: 115). A form that fits, a 'female' form, perhaps, one that's 'non-hierarchical', showing 'an organisation of material in fragments,' a 'constellation of strategies' (Blau du Plessis, *ibid*: 8). A "'shapeless" shapeliness' (Richardson, 1929: 247) maybe—but a shape nonetheless. I'm with the women of Workshop 9, agonising over aesthetics. I fear, like Carol Ascher, that 'too many people can take your aesthetic and churn out crap in three easy lessons. It's really like petit-point to get so close to one's subject, keep it porous, open, multi-climactic, and still keep it art' (*ibid*: 13).

Falling to pieces. Trying to pull myself together. Coming apart at the seams. So many beginnings, assembled in rough chronological order—but there are gaps. Spaces I just can't fill. 'Story' would be simpler—start to finish; rhyme and reason—but that's not how I remember it. Instead, these fragments, fleeting morsels of pleasure and pain, flying at me in 'bright splinters', just like Lance Olsen says (2005: 42).

Mum and me, pulling up at swamps and strangers' yards in the night, armed with empty takeaway milkshake cups and plastic bags to dig them up: sacred Arums, storm lilies and Mum's favourite: majestic red and white crowns of *Amaryllis*. She painted them for her mother—long dead. Oil colour as intense as the day she finished it (I imagine): still hanging on the dining room wall in a Central Queensland farmhouse. The smell, the texture: blood red. Winsor & Newton *Scarlet Lake*. We'd talked about names, we'd both chosen *Lily*.

I'm in a dark place of my own design. Searching for a way out (in?) I climb into the attic. Birds scraping in the gutter (building nests, flight preparations). Daylight seeping through the edges of the roof. Rain falling soft as a bridal veil. Rifling like a thief through a box of things I can't let go of, the torchlight falls on a dog-eared copy of *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*. Dead one thousand years, she speaks:

I have written in this book things I have seen and thought, in the long idle hours I have spent at home, without ever dreaming that others would see it... I did my best to keep it secret, but despite all my intentions I'm afraid it has come to light. (Shōnagon, c.996: 255)

Tenth-century Japan, where Kyoto city now stands. Behind the walls of the Imperial Palace, scribes faithfully reproduced records of great Chinamen in state-sanctioned calligraphy onto fine handmade paper—the Golden Age equivalent of carving pictograms on bone. Somehow, a pile of blank pages ended up in the household of the Empress, and, gifted the precious bundle, her handmaiden Sei Shōnagon found a new way: writing herself. Not content to trace the words of others, she traced instead the contours of her wandering mind—lists, poems, vignettes, 'things that quicken the heart':

Moving things—

... The voice of an autumn cricket, around the end of the ninth month or the beginning of the tenth, so frail and tentative that you scarcely know whether you hear it or not. A mother hen crouched low over her chicks. Dew glinting like multi-coloured jewels on the grasses in the garden in late autumn. Waking at dusk or

dawn and hearing the wind rustling in the bamboo. Anything you hear when you wake at night. (Shōnagon, *ibid*: 119)

In the throes of the first millennium, centuries before Cixous urged us to ‘smash everything, shatter the framework of institutions, blow up the law’ (1976: 875); Shōnagon, in her own quiet way, was breaking her own ‘arid millennial ground’ (*ibid*). Childless (or not), she bore the first *zuihitsu*, literally, ‘as the brush flows’—a formless anti-genre defined by fragments, the spaces in between echoing the unbound pile of paper kept by her pillow. A world—a life—built from fragments. The cloistered, candlelit confines of the Inner Palace, and Sei’s occasional forays beyond it. A court gentlewoman reading a lover’s letter by the light of a dying ember held in tongs. Stolen glances at the face of the Empress herself. The frozen ink of a brush stroke on a letter written on Michinoku paper carried through falling snow. Strings of pearls formed by rain clinging to spider webs on fences. The gasp of a fisher girl breaking surface.

The ‘real’ *Pillow Book* no longer exists, and with a vast—and still growing—archive of research based on numerous English translations and four different versions of the work, it seems the ‘map’ has, in many ways, come to engender the ‘territory’ it represents. A simple Google search unfurls a catalogue of responses not unlike the *Pillow Book* itself in scope and diversity. Scholars scratching their heads, wondering ‘what Sei Shōnagon thought she was writing’ (Carter, 2014: 80) or getting caught up in classification—casting her work as poetic catalogue (Morris, 1980); lyric essay (D’Agata, 2009) and ‘a groundbreaking antecedent’ of creative nonfiction (Singer & Walker, 2013): a ‘story without an ending’ (Kristeva, 1994: 45). Some see *The Pillow Book* best understood, today, as a ‘Heian-period blog’ (Midorikawa, 2008). A blogger named Christy contemplates how it might look as a BuzzFeed post (2015). Sei’s ‘listicles’ feature in a BuzzFeed list titled ‘21 Times People Used The Internet Before It Was Invented’ (Rodley, 2015). Artists, too, join the fray, weaving Shōnagon’s words through their own creative works. Ruth Ozeki seeds chapters of her 1999 novel *My Year of Meats* with quotations from *The Pillow Book*. Amy Krouse Rosenthal adopts Shōnagon’s ‘bizarre, haphazard’ mode of arrangement in her memoir, *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life* (2005). Filmmaker Peter Greenaway offers a dark, erotic take on aspects of *The Pillow Book* in his 1996 drama of the same name.

Responses to Shōnagon’s work evoke the inkblot test: everyone sees it differently. I first ‘saw’ the text twenty-three years ago, through the eyes of Chris Marker, in the haunting meditation on memory, *Sans Soleil*. This ‘film-essay’ comprises ‘documentary’ footage assembled in collage-like form, strung together with music and the words of a woman who refers to Shōnagon’s lists of ‘things that quicken the heart’. The idea captivated me—a kind of diary, but mainly for things that delight: a world without sorrow, without sadness. An *okashi* aesthetic, an ‘awareness of the frisson of pleasure that an object or moment produces’ (McKinney, 2006: xxii). I wanted to know more. But all the things I can discover now on the World Wide Web were out of reach back then. Before the Internet. The book was out of print. I trawled bricks-and-mortar second-hand bookshops but came up empty-handed. Inter-library loans were slow. No matter: I was intrigued, inspired enough by the *idea* of the book to make one of my own. I didn’t know what the ‘pillow’ part meant, but I pictured the inside of places where precious things were kept: velvet-lined jewellery boxes, silk-lined coffins. I was also taken with the idea of the ‘miniature’, having just read Susan Stewart’s beautiful book on how we imbue everyday objects with meaning, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1992). So I padded the base of a matchbox with a cotton ball and lined it with a tiny square cut from a bolt of Japanese

brocade my grandmother gave me. Dad offered to help, took me into his office late one night. Dad and me, at the photocopier, reducing things that quickened my heart over and over again until they fitted onto rectangles of rice paper the size of a matchbox. I only remember two of them: the first, a quote found on a pink Post-It note in the university library—I still don't know who wrote it but I know it off by heart: *I must kill my old self before I can do the work I must do here. I am now reborn.* The second, Bruce Nauman's 1967 hot pink neon spiral artwork, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*. I'd seen with my father at the National Gallery of Australia when I was still a girl. I assembled my fragments in a bundle, tied in a bow with a strand of silk, tucked them safe inside the matchbox, layered the sleeve with pearlescent papier-mâché, sealed with a decal of a blue mountain swallowtail.

A place to put my butterflies.

Now, in the internet era, the book I could only imagine all those years ago is in my hands within a week, delivered to my door. I'm still seeing *The Pillow Book* through someone else's eyes, of course: the most recent of the three translations, and the only one by a woman—award-winning Australian translator Margaret McKinney (2006). I like the way Sei speaks to her—through her.

If it reads strangely to our sensibility, let it be strange. The *Pillow Book* was written in a language and for a world in many ways unimaginably foreign to us—if your readers choose to travel to that world, let them taste the foreignness of it and its language. Refuse the urge to domesticate and tame this wonderful wild text that resists the translator's hand so defiantly. (McKinney, 2007: online)

But I digress: I want to say how Sei speaks to me—the part of me that's caught up in the details, can't let go, can't forget. The one with the butterfly net.

Black swans by the lake, red beaks slashed with white like war paint, their storm-cloud babies in tow. An envelope I can't open, marked *Paradise Ultrasound*. Heartbeat red on the black and white monitor. A black pot of Amaryllis bulbs that have sprouted green shoots every year since I met him but never bloomed.

Neuroscientists, nowadays, talk about the 'mind-wandering mode':

[where] thoughts seem to move seamlessly from one to another, there's a merging of ideas, visual images, and sounds, of past, present and future. Thoughts turn inward—loosely connected, stream of consciousness thoughts so much like the night-time dream that we call them daydreams. (Levitin, 2014: 38)

But before there were neuroscientists Sei was onto something with the lists she scattered through *The Pillow Book*, with titles including: Things That Gain by Being Painted. Cheerful Things. Things That Cannot Be Compared. Splendid Things. Sometimes, they're simple, elegant, unrelated to anything else:

Things that are far yet near—

Paradise. The course of a boat. Relations between men and women.
(Shōnagon, *ibid*: 163)

Others take off in tangents, meandering like minds—the defining characteristic of *zuihitsu*: 'refusing to offer any explanation of the connections, orders, or hierarchies that may or may not exist between the fragments ... leaving space for readers to enter into the text and create meaning for themselves' (Rudd, 2011: 47). A list of 'Things One Must Be Wary Of' leads from the perils of boat crossings to the plight of women who dive for shells, the men 'floating lazily about on the surface'. A list of 'Things

that Make the Heart Lurch With Anxiety’ meanders from the trepidation of watching a horse race to fear of the plague to hearing the voice of your lover in an unexpected place. Thoughts (sometimes) linked like memories, chained by association.

As the brush flows...

A flow state—the machinations of a mind at play—can ‘lead to great creativity and solutions to problems that seemed unsolvable’ (Levitin, *ibid*).

This is where I write *zuihitsu*—for the permission, the blur, the rooms created by the little blocks of text. (Hahn, *ibid*: 65)

A place to put these butterflies: a *zuihitsu*.

Lily

Me in the matriarch’s garden in a dress the same colour as the storm lilies I loved—they only bloom after rain. Amaryllis grew like weeds, great clumps of them, majestic red and white crowns. It was there I first learned about lilies.

Mum and me, pulling up at swamps and strangers’ yards in the night, armed with empty takeaway milkshake cups and plastic bags to dig them up: sacred Arums, storm lilies and Mum’s favourite, Amaryllis. She painted them for her mother—now long dead. Oil colour as intense now as the day she finished it (I imagine): still hanging on the dining room wall in a Central Queensland farmhouse. The smell, the texture: blood red. Winsor & Newton Scarlet Lake.

A black pot of Amaryllis bulbs that have sprouted green shoots every year since I met him but never bloomed. We’d talked about names. We’d both chosen Lily. Me: Storm Lily. We both love storms. She will storm through this life (unlike me). A Marvel superhero named Storm. I love Storm Lilies (from Mum). Lillian: Mum’s middle name. He brought me in the canvases he’d had made up of all the photos of lilies he’d given me, proof of the longevity of the handsome perfumed blooms he always left before he flew back to camp. He was sheepish, confused: he’d had them made to give to me as our two-year wedding anniversary gift, conceived and ordered by him while I was still pregnant.

‘That’s a bit exciting, isn’t it?’

‘Are you serious? You’re *serious*?’

And we’d accepted it. Embraced it: you and me, we’re gonna be a family.

Picking a school. Deciding on a hospital. Walking around like I had superpowers. He had ideas for a nursery he was going to tell me about when he gave me the canvases. But then nothing. Frantic posts on internet forums. Googling, ‘no heartbeat, can ultrasound be wrong?’ The day I felt the mass give way, at a café by the sea. Finishing my coffee, getting up, careful in case blood had seeped onto my skirt—then the blood in the toilet bowl—red as the wine I would consume every day from then on, while we ‘dealt’ with it. I thought, should I plunge my hand in to feel it, to see it? Something. I did nothing. Flushed it away, went back to the table, ordered red wine and a bloody steak. Then, in the middle of the night, another release. Blood like wine.

We grieved, our wake was a month-long booze-fest. I got so drunk I obliterated myself. Oblivion. Depths I could not plumb. We went to Wategos to swim in the healing water. Sat there in the heat, parched, bloated. We had nothing to say. Storm lilies after rain. Mum telling me about her miscarriage in a train toilet – I thought: did I bring this on? Manifest it? All the babies I didn’t want. My hand on my stomach. I stopped cleaning

up, still haven't. Unchecked, mould grows rampant in the shower well—unlike the barren inside of my womb where nothing grows. Sacred Arum: *In Sympathy*. Him clasping me when it was clear all hope was lost, in the doctor's room that day. Tears in his eyes. The doctor referring us to abortion clinics to have the rest of it removed. A forced smile:

'You can try again'.

'It means you *can* get pregnant'.

The audiobook *Letting Go* I couldn't finish. I'm walking again now. By the lake. Black swans, red beaks slashed with white like war paint; their storm-cloud babies in tow. Plaintive little calls to me in the moonlight as I pass by. I have no bread for them. In the attic, a wooden box with Amaryllis bulbs swaddled in newspaper and a card scrawled in child's handwriting:

I hope they grow for you.

Now, in this new millennium, like a lily bulb that can still shoot and flower decades—maybe even centuries—later, Sei's work lifts me from my own dark place, my words taking shape in the form she founded.

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