

STILL LIFE

with teapot

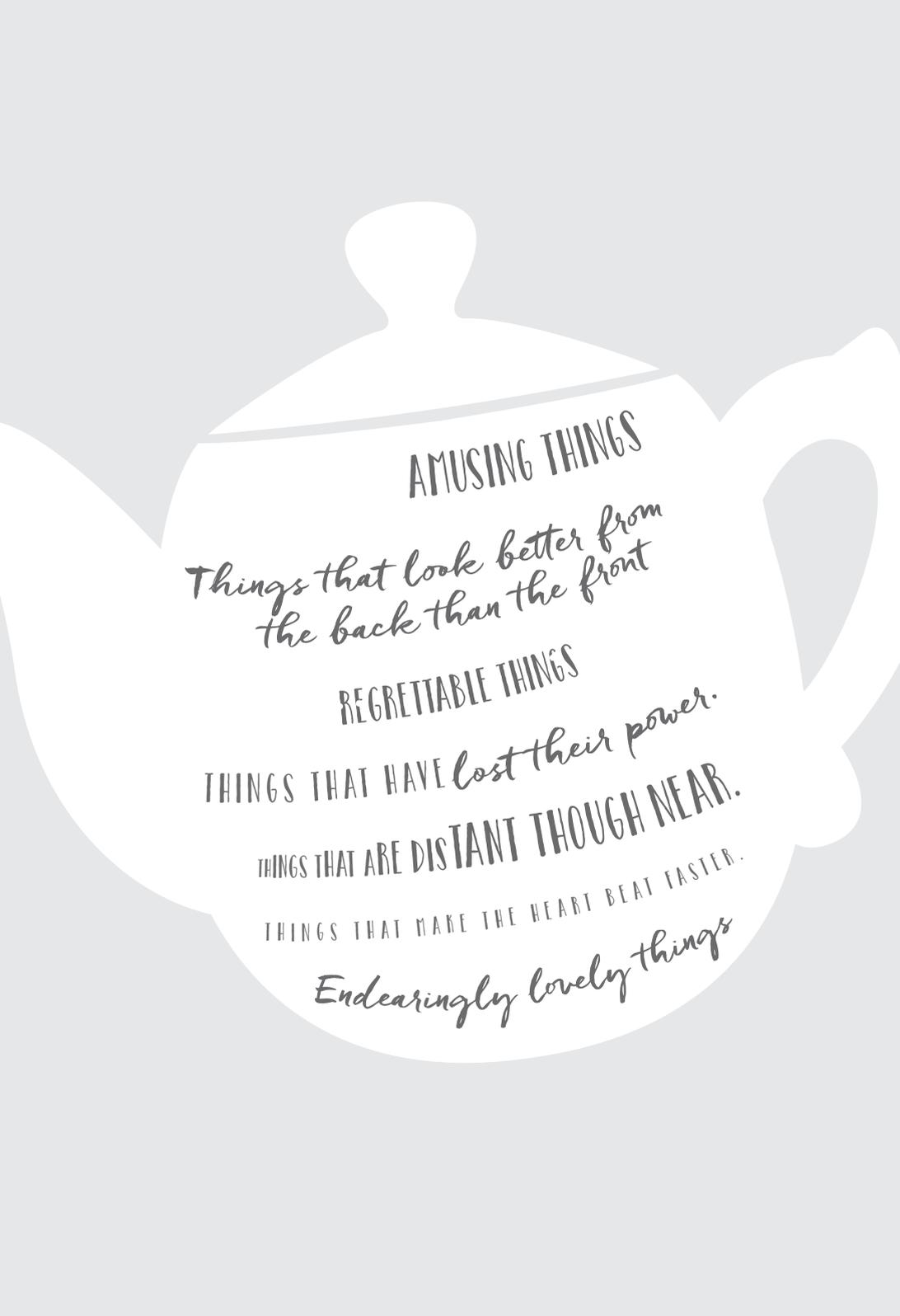
on zen, writing & creativity

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AMUSING THINGS

Things that look better from
the back than the front

REGRETTABLE THINGS

THINGS THAT HAVE *lost their power.*

THINGS THAT ARE DISTANT **THOUGH NEAR.**

THINGS THAT MAKE THE HEART BEAT FASTER.

Endearingly lovely things

THE
queen
OF
everything
everywhere

The Queen of Everything Soup

I am The Queen of Everything Soup, but feel free to call me Madame Teapot, Moonbeam or Pencil Brain. I amuse myself by choosing a new creative name each day, inspired by the guy in Melbourne who changed his name to Very Impressive by deed poll in 1992. Go ahead, you can play too. How about Nasturtium, Shoe Dude, or Blue Happy?

Beyond my name, I am sixty-two years old, a woman living in a time and place moving so rapidly that I can't keep up. Have you heard the story about a man riding very fast on a horse? As he galloped past, his friend yelled, 'Where are you going?' 'I don't know, ask the horse,' the rider replied. I don't have a horse, but you get my meaning.

It's raining, and I'm making soup. This is my recipe.

Everything Soup. Choose your two oldest onions. Fry them gently with garlic, ginger, cumin, paprika, turmeric. Be lavish with spices. Chop whatever is in your crisper drawer: the shabby remnant of cabbage, half a withered capsicum, two carrots... all vegetables are welcome here. Cover with water, add a tin of tomatoes, some frozen peas, a slosh of sweet chilli sauce, a blob of curry paste and a tablespoon of tomato paste if it hasn't gone mouldy.

Herbs are excellent: basil, parsley, spring onions, those last limp coriander leaves and stalks. Lemon zest, a can of chickpeas, leftover chicken if you're that way inclined. Bring to the boil and simmer gently. When the veggies are cooked add some miso. Dissolve it in a cup with some hot soup broth first so it doesn't remain a big lump. Serve in your favourite bowl, sprinkled with parmesan. It's divine with sourdough toast if you haven't given up an entire food group, such as dairy or carbs. My thought about this, by the way, is that unless you swell up and die when you eat something, there's no point avoiding it. Here's the thing: no matter how many gym visits or green smoothies you make, or vitamins you swallow, you won't escape old age, sickness and death, unless of course you die young. Meanwhile, why deny yourself cream on your pudding or yummy, oily pizza? Just saying. My views on this make me a tad unpopular with some of my friends and relatives, as you can imagine. Anyhow, what I was going to say, and forgive me for employing an obvious metaphor before we've got to know each other better, is that life is crazy abundant with all manner of things: haiku, petticoats, cancer, global warming, cucumbers, mountains, small children, slippers, turtles. There is Facebook and there are mice. It is Everything Soup, guys, and we are in it.

Fresh vibe, flower moon, strange path of life leading everywhere and nowhere ... Shirt sleeves, autumn melancholy, bright curtains, bouquets of hideous roses, a frayed green dress ...

What more do you need to know about me? Once I was almost beautiful, but now I have a wrinkly neck and

sometimes go shopping with my cardigan inside out. I am twice divorced. No need to feel sorry for me. I don't regret my marriages and I'm nearly over the shock of my last husband suddenly preferring a dumpy woman from his fishing club. Mostly, I like being single. I have a lovely range of creative loungewear: floral pyjamas, vintage kimonos, soft dressing-gowns. I'm in complete command of the remote control. I do whatever I want whenever I want. Sometimes my dinner is last night's pad thai eaten in front of the telly. If I'm feeling particularly decadent I don't even heat it up. Ah, the wicked freedom of it! I was far too sensible when I was a wife.

I now have an invisible husband. When I change my mind about a supermarket purchase, I return it, explaining to the nice young chap at the service counter that my husband bought the wrong batteries, or got oat milk instead of almond milk. He gives me a refund, no worries, and we have a little chat about his latest hair colour. He seems to like me, although he must wonder why I have such a fuckwit of a husband.

I've decided to write a pillow book. I've always loved the famous one – *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*: a collection of observations written by a courtesan of Empress Consort Teishi in tenth-century Japan. I admire her lists, her elegant gossip, her fine eye for detail and dry sense of humour. I want to be her when I grow up, as well as Leunig, Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits, Jack Kerouac, Frida Kahlo, Sharon Creech, Helen Garner, Anne Lamott, Eloise, and Pippi Longstocking. I'd prefer not to have the deaths of Jack and Frida, just the creativity and colour. The good thing about

being my age is that if you haven't grown up already, you don't have to. So I've decided to write a pillow book, because I have things to say about what it is to be an ageing woman living in the twenty-first century with as much dignity as she can manage, and saying these things out loud on the bus is probably not the best way to interface with the universe.

My book will be a good place for me to record my lists. Sei Shōnagon compiled lists on many topics: Surprising and distressing things; Amusing things; Things that look better from the back than the front. It's interesting how many of her observations are relevant today. For example, her list of Rare things includes a pair of silver tweezers that pull out hairs properly and a person who is without a single quirk.

I have always been in favour of lists. I make sensible ones: Buy pecan nuts, avocado. Post office. Bank. This serves the function of helping me feel that life is under control, even and especially when it isn't. The other kind of list is more fun. You pick a category and then record your observations, as Sei Shōnagon did.

Annoying things: A sesame seed stuck in your teeth. Telephone numbers that are one digit short. Supergluing your fingers together. People who don't give a friendly wave when you make way for them in traffic.

Wonderful things: Finding something is half-price when you were going to buy it anyway. Being the only one in your swimming lane. The spongy surface at kids' playgrounds. Scoring a purple leopard skin

jacket from a dress-up box. *New Yorker* cartoons. Mangoes. Stepping on a Cheezel and crunching it to smithereens.

Things one should not admit to: Preferring one's own company. Peeing in the sea. Peering into other people's medicine cupboards.

Interesting book titles: *5 Easy Steps to Becoming a Witch*; *Freud's Couch*, *Scott's Buttocks*, *Brontë's Grave*; *The Big Book of Lesbian Horse Stories*; *All My Friends Are Dead*; *Why Men Marry Bitches*; *The Pop-up Book of Phobias*.

Disagreeable things: Finding a hair in your food. Phone calls from strange call-centre people in India. Chain emails that ask you to send them on to eight amazing women who have changed your life.

Embarrassing old ladyish things: Starting a sentence then tapering off with 'Where was I going with that ...?' Bunions. Discovering, while in a cab on your way to the airport, an old bit of dental floss entwined in your necklace.

Okay, enough lists for now. I must get on with my day.

*

I live in a retirement complex. The residents are a motley crew. I haven't lived here long, but so far I've noted one of

everything: one Asian lady, one blind woman, one raw-food cook, one gay guy, one definite alcoholic, one artist, one lady with Alzheimer's, one man with Parkinson's, one dude in a wheelchair. I am the one old hippy, which is why I am allowed to say 'dude'. I go downstairs, have a friendly, meaningless chat with the caretaker, and set off to visit my friend Marlina. We've started a club. It is called WUFWS (Wild Unpredictable Fools Who Sew). So far there are two of us. This is our mission statement:

We are constantly aware that we always have everything we need to fully enjoy the here and now. We try to get through each day with as much delight as possible. We pledge to include treats, fun, colour, creativity and silliness in our lives on a daily basis.

It's the best club I've ever been in. It's only the second one, actually. When I was eight I went to Girl Guides, once. We were given a jolly activity: to see who could write their name fastest using crumbled-up Weetabix. I decided I'd rather be at home reading a book. I've never been much of a joiner, but I like being a wild unpredictable fool who sews.

Marlina lives in a terrace house not far from my place. She's extraordinarily untidy. I remind her I'm not the housework police but as always she apologises profusely, sweeping a mound of clean, unfolded laundry off her sofa so I can sit down. She brews a pot of lapsang souchong and scrabbles around until she finds some biscotti. We haul out our sewing and begin. Marlina is appliquéing vintage roses onto a calico bag. I'm darning a maroon merino jumper.

Mending things is my way of honouring the worn and the shabby. I don't want people in sweatshops in Bangladesh making me new stuff. There is too much stuff in this world and not enough savouring of what we already have, in my opinion.

One of the things I love about my friend is that she talks all the time so I don't need to. I listen, contributing an affirmative word here and there, while Marlena's intelligent mind ranges far and wide and back again.

'Was reading my horoscope yesterday in a magazine. It promised all sorts of good things, including clarity in my financial doings and a possible love interest in June. It really resonated, until I realised I'd been reading Taurus.'

We hoot with laughter, because she's a Pisces. Unlike me, Marlena wants a love interest. She's been lonely since her husband died four years ago and wishes for some companionship in this crazy thing called life. As for me, since my marriage ended, I have had several minor odd encounters with the male species, as follows:

One: I was waiting in a long queue at a government office one Tuesday morning when a Romanian man started talking to me. He was short but not unattractive, and he was a very smooth talker.

'Beautiful woman, your brown eyes entrance me. I want to take you special places. You deserve happiness, you are a flower of loveliness.' I could have snubbed him, but the queue was lengthy and oh, what the hell. We talked about gypsy music, the weather and Middle Eastern food. 'May I telephone you? I will take you out for a lovely dinner. I will treat you like a princess.' Feeling idiotic, I gave him my

phone number. He called that evening, drunk, begging me to come to his flat so he could feel my bosoms. ‘Inappropriate,’ I said and hung up. Thankfully he did not call back.

Two: At Marlena’s insistence, I had one attempt at internet dating. The man sounded interesting enough: a photographer who liked to travel. Sadly, he turned out to be a lonely stoner who reeked of stale smoke. When I said I wasn’t interested in having a relationship, playing the I’m Not Over My Marriage card, he asked very straightforwardly, ‘Fair enough, how about sex then?’ I wasn’t sure if he meant right then or just in general but I explained that, for me, sex was not a treat like ice-cream you had on the side but a joyous part of a committed relationship, then gently turfed him into the night. Next morning he messaged me with, ‘I should be waking up with you in my arms instead of sitting here staring at this bloody piece of toast,’ which was endearing, but not endearing enough to make me change my mind. I will stick with my tiny crush on the man at the post office, who is ten years younger than me and possibly gay, but who has a kind face and wears colourful shirts. When I buy stamps, we talk. I pretend we’re flirting, but no doubt he just finds me odd. I remain content to live alone, except for the moth residing in my kitchen who flies out from behind electrical appliances now and again.

However, Marlena has not given up her quest for a significant other, despite having met a whole lot of nothing so far. Her latest coffee date was with a spindly man in his seventies whose hobby was frequenting the airport at odd hours in order to photograph minor sports stars arriving or departing. He’d arrived at their meeting place, a garden

cafe, clutching two hefty albums of these gems to show her.

‘I told him I didn’t believe in sports, and got the hell out of there. Perhaps I should become a lesbian?’ she says, offering me the biscuit tin again. I grin in an accepting manner, indicating I’m broad-minded, if you’ll pardon my pun, and take another biscotti.

‘The thing is,’ she continues, ‘I really like cock.’ This makes me laugh so hard I splutter tea and crumbs everywhere. Marlena loves to shock people. ‘I had my best sex with my third husband in hotels because you could get oil all over the sheets and not worry about it,’ she’ll say gaily, or ‘I was in a hot tub after a retreat in California with a Zen rōshi and I saw his wrinkled little scrotum.’ She does it to amuse herself at book club when things get tedious.

Young people think we are just boring old people. They are wrong. There are things I haven’t told you yet.

*

Once I was mad and lived on the edge of nowhere, planting silver beet and bright nasturtiums, slowly gardening the days away and folding myself into the corners of the night, folding time into squares of old newspaper and cutting the squares into stars and hearts and rows of paper dolls. I slept by myself under a blue quilt and ate bread and cheese dipped in soup from a Chinese bowl. I loved a man who didn’t love me. It was an old story and a sad story and nobody cared a fig.

Or maybe they did. Certainly everyone in my house had advice for me.

Keep busy, Bella, said my grandmother, you must keep

busy. Crisp syllables slipped from her lips like dried leaves or scraps of old paper and as she spoke her brown fingers knew no rest, deftly chopping oranges into slices for marmalade. Keep busy, she said. It has always worked for me. She slid the oranges into a white bowl and left them there to soak and soften. My grandmother put on her sunflower earrings and off she went, looking as cheerful as the sun itself, off down the street to play bridge.

How can he have done this to you? asked my sister. For you are so beautiful, said my sister, as if lust or happiness or loneliness were influenced by beauty. You can borrow my lipstick, my sister said, my good necklace, my white shirt, anything you fancy as long as you don't get it dirty, and then she fossicked around for her car keys and vanished for days on end. In country towns on slow afternoons, librarians bought textbooks from my sister and at night she ate steak and chips in the motel restaurant, and dreamed of sticky date pudding and a large bank balance and a new pair of shoes.

Plenty more fish in the sea, said my father, a sensible man of few words. He was not concentrating properly, having one eye and the best part of his mind on the evening weather report. Ants in my pants. Bats in my belfry. Fish in the sea. Perhaps he was right. Down to the shoreline I went, searching for mermaids and filling my pocket with tiny, purple shells. I asked the time of a rather nice seahorse. I knew in my heart that not just any old fish would do.

And still my life stretched out ahead like a curse or a blessing.

You must eat properly, said my mother. The worst thing you can do is not eat. She fed me porridge with walnuts and honey, fish cakes with herbs, nectarines and cream. My cheeks grew pink and my thighs grew plump but still my nights were lonely and the sheets on my bed were cold to my exploring touch.

My grandfather said nothing, but he sat with me on the veranda until mosquitoes and stars came dancing out. I rolled his cigarettes for him from a tin of dark tobacco, fragrant shreds poking out of the neat, white twists. He played a tango for me on his piano accordion, the tattoos of all the women he had loved and lost fading on his wrinkled, hairy arms. My mother brought us sticky semolina cake drenched in orange juice. Ever so quietly my heart began to mend.

Then wouldn't you just know it? Out of the blue, who should ring but the unreliable man himself. How are you, he asked, my faithless lover, leaving no gap for my reply. Things have changed, he told me, his voice as slippery as a wet lizard. I need to talk to you, he wheedled, and begged me to go to dinner at our old familiar place.

Not with you, I told him, not tonight, not tomorrow, not ever, not ever again. I am too busy, I told him, and these are some of the many things that are far more interesting than you. I have much advice to listen to, a garden to weed, plump thighs to squeeze into old blue jeans, and a pocket full of shells to arrange on my window ledge and anyway, I told him, I have met somebody else. Actually, I intend to get married, I said, to a seahorse, sometime around the end of next week. And I did, carrying a bouquet of red

nasturtiums and surrounded by my bridesmaids, a merry row of dancing paper dolls.

Okay, that wasn't exactly true, but it nearly was. Our lives are not solid. They are stories that twist over time. Cobwebs, smoke, mirrors. Fictional accounts, not facts.

*

I like facts. I collect unusual ones, as follows: A Bird Poop Facial at the Shikuza New York Day Spa costs \$180, promises to brighten and nourish the complexion, and involves sitting for an hour with a mask of rice bran, water and powdered nightingale droppings on your face. During one of his periods of insanity, King George III insisted on ending every sentence he spoke with the word 'peacock'. Ancient Swedes practised euthanasia by leaving their elders to die after putting them into earthenware jars. Bill Gates paid \$34.6 million for Leonardo Da Vinci's notebook. According to Native American Indian myth, a dog with two different coloured eyes can see both heaven and earth.

Apart from facts, I collect teacups, old postcards, neurotic friends, recipes, scarves and decent pens. What else can I tell you? There are days on which I talk out loud to bumblebees, days on which all my yesterdays rise up to meet me in the taste of lemon verbena tea, or the smell of clean washing. I have never drunk a cup of coffee or a glass of beer, but when I was a kid I owned two goldfish named Tweedledum and Tweedledee. I recently bought a book titled *How To Write a Damn Good Novel*, for a dollar, in an op shop. Once upon a time I fell in love with a beautiful young man in a park in New York. He never

knew. We were both watching an exceptionally good band in Washington Square Park. New York is my most beloved city. I'd like to go there one more time. I'll stop off in Hawaii, put a red hibiscus behind my ear, enjoy some pedal steel guitar. I travel frequently, in my imagination; a wonderful place without airport queues, sneezing people or tropical diseases.

Disappointing things: Missing the train. Some haircuts. A phone that stops ringing just as you pick it up. Dry, tasteless mandarins.

Things I've overheard in cafes: 'I'm tired of falling over and bumping and bruising myself.' 'He's not stalkerish or anything, just keen.' 'Getting married before you are thirty is like leaving a party before 10pm.' 'Compared to an electron, a flea's balls are really big.'

Dreams you're glad to wake up from: Dream in which you are unsuccessfully trying to organise hundreds of small children into a circle to play a word game. Dream in which you look strange because you have lost several front teeth. Long convoluted dream involving expensive hair products and being locked in a cupboard.

Sei Shōnagon's lists: Things that have a hot feel. Things that have lost their power. Things that are distant though near. Things that make the heart

beat faster. Things that arouse a fond memory of the past. Things without merit. Things that fall from the sky.

Regarding the last: Rain. Sleet. Snow. Meteorite fragments. A leaf. A feather. A wish. A prayer. Can't think of anything else ...

I wander around the room, not sure where to go next, so I google 'Things that fall from the sky'. Apparently frogs, worms, non-dairy creamer, a cow, golf balls, meat, a human body, money, blood, a rain of spiders, star jelly fish (whatever they are), multicoloured snow, and hundreds of starlings have fallen from the sky, though not all at the same time. Who knew? Still not sure where to go next, I eat a piece of cake, paint my toenails and don't write another word for three weeks.

Later, much later. Ate a button. I know! How, you may well ask, or indeed, why?

I was on the patio removing tight elastic from my pyjama pants and drinking green tea. Once I'd have dealt with a few extra kilos by living on cottage cheese and rice crackers but contentment is my current aim. No one but me minds my lumpy bits. I don't imagine the moth has an opinion about it.

First I unpicked three small black buttons, serving no purpose other than decorative, and put them down beside me on the coffee table. It was lovely, sitting dreamily in the idle afternoon warmth. Then I picked up a little black button, popped it in my mouth and washed it down with a swig of

tea. It was a reflexive action, the one I do each morning when I take a multivitamin with my morning cuppa. No real harm done. It will make its innocent way through my body, no doubt. I don't know whether this counts as a strange thing I did by mistake, because technically I did it on purpose.

*

Not much has happened lately. For now, I've lost Marlana. She's gone to Bali with an almost handsome man she met on the train. She's left town with no return address. She died in her sleep. She's a character I invented that I'm considering abandoning. I'm not even sure I want to write a book any more. All I seem to have is many lists and facts and not enough narrative. Once upon a time the peonies were in full bloom and there were no cell phones or traffic cops and everyone was fairly cheerful, except when they weren't. This is the true story of my life. Except it isn't.

I wonder what it would be like to eat a cherry blossom? I also wonder if there's a word for the misreading of things, such as thinking it says 'Driver Under Reconstruction' on the front of a bus when it actually says 'Driver Under Instruction', or reading a headline as 'Deadly Tomato Hits America' instead of 'Deadly Tornado'? Today I read 'The room had its own silliness' instead of 'The room had its own stillness.'

Sign of wandering loneliness: Almost telling the very bored girl in the posh underwear store that my son and his wife have bought a small dog.