

## Independent author

### Sal Brereton

#### excerpt from 'Treading water'

Biographical note:

Sal Brereton helped establish the early 1980s Sydney Women Writers' workshop. She was for a time co-editor of *Magic Sam* magazine and, as well as having written scripts for experimental film, has published the prose sequences: *Ideal conditions* (Experimental Art Foundation), *Sitting rigid* (Little Esther Press) and *Taking stock* (Jelly Tongue Press). Unpublished work includes 'Treading water' and two novels, 'The Vau tree' and 'Above the clouds'. She lives in Sydney and is currently researching her sequel to 'Above the clouds'.

I open my eyes – a red-and-white-dotted radio pole in the hills ahead; round grey clouds above and a sign by a park saying 1km to the turn-off to the pool.

We stop and get out. While we eat, Lil is telling me about a recent love affair. I find myself looking at an old lady in the caravan park at the same time. (Dressed in a nightdress, she sets a sprinkler by a back patch of sun near the camper-caravan she lives in.) I want to be able to see the weekend around us. I want to feel that my mind doesn't wander but, on the contrary, that I'm guiding it finally the right way.

As we sit by the car drinking coffee a small truck pulls up on the dirt track beside us. A man asks if we've seen cows running in the oval 'just now'. We say no. He says he's been phoned about some. We all look up at the empty green field.

Perhaps, since I feel detached, I turn and say: 'Well, hope they weren't referring to us'. For the first time since coming back to Sydney I feel satisfyingly 'Australian' in the setting. He takes his hat off and appreciates the joke by not laughing. He will say something more deadpan to please us. He says, 'Well, catch yous later ...', then, pleased with himself, he drives off and, in the back of his truck in a cage, a small pup jumps madly up and down as he leaves.

I imagined I could write my way through the weekend – as if any fact, or even misfortune, could at least be part of a small, positive, end result.

Into the piece I could wind myself as well. I could stand, without standing out, under the weight of the words, protected. Passing through Goulburn for example – the writing might let me appear under the wide verandah of a Milk Bar – 'just looking'.

The night before, over the phone, she'd asked if I'd ever been inclined to write about New Brighton – a term I took at the time to mean 'childhood' or perhaps 'psychology'. When I said I planned to write about the beach but never planned to write anything 'psychological' she immediately said it wasn't what she'd meant at all.

I dreamt we were both heads, suspended in space among stars. Above us, huge signs announce star-clusters – The Saucepan, The Archer, The Lyre – and we agree, though without speaking, that we preferred it before, without neon ads cluttering up space with their glare.

Lil pulls over to the side of the road. The indicator lights clicking make a rhythm, faster and slower, as the car idles and she finds a cassette – 'The art of noise' – finds a Walkman's earphones and fits them in her ears.

We drive off again. From now on the driving is faster, more connected, more hugging to the road.

Then suddenly in the sunlight: the serrated olive edges of a wide pine forest. The deep pleasure of the bordering-on-black of its mass. The Islamic silhouette of its peaks, its intricate edges, the confident dark lace of its repeating.

My eye was held, ornamented in them, and for seconds as we passed I dreamed in shadow.

‘At New Brighton we walked along the shoreline under a big full moon and the beach had the delicate formula of every dusk that summer – wide pink, white and blue stripes washing-out, deepening and lightening at the last minute in different strengths – over the sea or the hinterland behind. Everything had a luminescent glow from the moon reflected in the wash-back and, that night, the whole village seemed out fishing in its soft light. (Lilliputian silhouettes running up wet sand to change baits.) She turned and said how beautiful the world was and automatically we both looked to the gold moon, as though its bright full face was showing us how to see the earth.

(On other nights – no moons – and a scary about-to-be-black, magnified by the sand's final, faintest glow disappearing.)’

We cross through a second stone pass and Lil whistles and sings again. But this time it's nothing to do with me. I don't feel I have to comment, or that the sound's an overture aimed at me, because I see her leg moving to the music. I see she's talking to, singing along with, her own cassette and I feel unencumbered, relieved of my duty, free to be absorbed in any thing I want.

I rummage through a box back-stage in a theatre with odd props: ‘Japan, Urgent, Fearless, Amused, Aloof’ – but I'm not worried, and eventually they all waft away. I'm a girl in a train in Tokyo, then a tourist travelling on tracks between Ahmedabad and Bombay to a serious meeting at a hospice. I hear the train's roar and sail through the scene free of danger of any kind.

Moving in toward Goulburn, into the outskirts of the city, past the graveyard beyond the Merino complex and a sign saying Wombeyan Caves.

Then out, past a giant concrete sheep.

I write a note about my recent haircut – which depresses me – as if all my worries have been handed into and moved around in my hair. Later I erase what I'd written – hoping things might still ‘fall into place’. (Perhaps, my real fear – that it's my history I'm taking to the weekend – my past held up in my head.)

We go by Lake George's sign and then a half dry, cardboard-coloured lake.

We are winding our way there.

I want to *blurt things out*.

‘No, stay centred; focus on what's ahead.’

(A ‘Two Way’ sign.)

We stop on the outskirts of Canberra and tidy ourselves – comb our hair, re-arrange clothes – and I see an image of her running at the sea one dusk in summer, fully clothed – my father amused at first, then concerned.

The road starts again and I manage to stay safely on the surface of events. Despite this, at the last second, I feel a sudden urge to shift things. I feel too passive and out of my depth. I worry that if, as in an experiment, I came purely to record, my preparedness for such acceptance will surely cause things: that I'll create what I think I simply observe.

A few blocks from the house the notes I've written seem to mass inside my head like a threat. I wind down the window as though the wind might lessen them, telling myself their presence on paper doesn't threaten a thing.

For a beat we pause at the lights at the corner. They turn green. We park in the drive and, though I know I've arrived, I don't want to get out. Lil opens her door and goes. I leave the car, feeling the steady ground beneath my feet, scanning its surface swiftly, searching for something – even unimportant – that can tell me I've fully dispelled all risk.

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Recorded words posed no menace. In the living room we easily filled our time with agreeable speech, our tones softened and deepened in the face of her disease.

She seemed tired – her movements slower and more laboured, as though she might've been in pain – yet she insisted she felt better and said her kidneys only played up when she forgot and tried to do too much.

It was her free day so we walked to the nearby shops at Lynham – going to Coles and the second-hand store for fun. At home we tried on the skirt and scarf we bought and she showed us a red and white blazer she was halfway through refashioning 'from a dress'.

The following day we helped set up her dialyser, opening packets of saline and attaching the metres of plastic lines that she needed to clean her blood.

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We sat talking with her for the hours it took for the machine to clean her – twice making tea which we served in the porcelain we knew she liked the best. As we drank, we talked about the tapestry she was working on – a computer-like image of a woman's face, several metres square, that she was knotting in thick coloured cord and which would probably need another half year to complete.

On our third day she took us to the Hyatt for the smorgasbord and said it was something she wanted us to remember her by. (At home, beforehand, getting ready, each of us at different mirrors. Words from one room or other: 'Okaaaaay?' 'Right, I'm ready,' 'Yes, me too', and then silence as we each lost ourselves a little longer in something more we applied to our faces.)

We ate our lavish four-course meals and couldn't believe how much we all managed to 'slip away'. I remember she was the first diner that day to make her way, moving without her cane, to the dessert table. (The indelible image of her spearing her spoon with the unstable balance of a delighted child into a red mound of quivering jelly, sighing 'My favourite!').

After the meal we strolled around the grounds. She had a camera in her bag and, when a man passed by, she asked if he'd oblige. I felt he sensed the mood between us, spending extra time setting the shot up and, as he stood frozen – looking through the lens – we, too, were mindful to freeze our smiles – letting them hide the shakier emotions we kept private inside.

Later, at home, darkness fell and none of us saw it until the streetlights flickered on. We closed the curtains and went with her to her room. She undressed and I noticed how the years had changed the texture of her skin – its paleness now papery and in parts more thin. We sat with her for a time, remembering the shared pleasures of our meal, then eventually left for our own beds.

I start by fleeing doors, stairwells, office towers and phones to a ship where I polish mirrors, imitating the sun and see in mimicry anything's possible: all voices, past feelings, all personalities. I come to hear my 'original' voice at a banquet and introduce myself formally 'Good evening, this is *Sally*', for the first time.

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The next morning I stood in the yard looking back at her treatment room and saw bags labelled 'Contaminated Waste', with boxes of saline, syringes, gauze and tubes stacked on shelves to the ceiling. Her machine was beside them – the dials stopped, lights out, the motor finally silent. I assumed I was taking my own private stock of the room and was shocked when I heard her say 'Sally!' from the kitchen door and turned to see her standing there.

After breakfast we looked at the photo she was basing her tapestry on. It was from a magazine and, though it was no one Lil and I knew, she said the woman reminded her of the nurses she'd known. It expressed her idea of their strengths and she planned to dedicate the finished tapestry to them. Below the photo were working drawings – painted versions of the same face morphing to the capable clear-eyed gaze of a carer. Then she showed us the final mock-up – a piece of graph-paper, in four millimetre squares, overlaid with the head – each square a pixel in an ocean of thousands which would one day form a work covering the whole wall.

We talked about Japan. She asked again about the book I'd promised to write about living there and, though I hadn't written a word, I told her I had. I said I'd bring the chapters down with me, the next time, and assured myself there and then I'd be able to start the second I went back.

When it came time for Lil and me to leave, we both felt ill at ease – feeling we'd forced a final parting. We spent our time sharing encouraging, optimistic comments – as though heavier expressions held a weight that neither of us could risk lifting.

On the road home we were grateful for each other's company. Cars; land; laden, heavy clouds. After Goulburn the first spots of rain and in the gloom, a new threat – as though nature was dangerous. Yet, nearer Sydney, staring up at office towers, I register for the first time that surfaces won't fall down around me in a major quake and, when we get home, grateful, I ring to tell her we're safe.

No breeze. The harbour a silver sheath. Moored yachts marking time – their masts barely moving, to and fro – and I go to sleep planning the chapters I've promised to write.

This morning, deliberating at my desk after twenty minutes not writing, an attendant sense of forgetting the thread of what I'm talking about – as if there's a topic, which there isn't – and I'm treading cautiously, hoping to coax it back.

Out at the Heads a large white cargo ship lines up as it starts its entry in – the long deep boom of its horn echoing through the haze like the start of an aria.

I will begin my story of Japan for her in a swirling pool of water with a woman washing rice. I see the clockwise current release a white starch and incrementally run clear. I hear the dull ‘one-two’ of the woman’s fist each turn – her soft heart-thud filling the pearl grains with her blood's life force.

It happened on the island – so was it an ‘island custom’ – this traditional circling I always associated with the place?

*‘Geographically, Ogasawara’s coral islands are divided into four groups – the two main ones being the Father and Mother Island chains. To the Father Island belong the Elder and Younger Brothers, and the Grandson Isles; to the Mother Island – the Elder and Younger Sisters, and the Isle of the Niece. All consist of dense, subtropical forests and rugged terrain with stretches of white sand beach. Of the plants – the hibiscus, the Ogasawara and pandanus palms, and the white popinac are the most prolific ...’*

I inevitably come back to the islands – to the dotted line of land I spent my last months on – as though their semi-tropical beaches can let me link Japan to the distant sands of my own past. (If I really wrote for her about Japan, ideally her story would be set – not in modern Tokyo or on the Bonins – but in a different location, somewhere centuries ago.) For now, I feel the facts must remain with what I have before me: memories, diary notes, Polaroid photos of myself and friends, and a curious, about-to-be-retired, old Russian cruise ship.

‘On deck of the Felix Dzerjinsky it’s not quite dawn and the day's already hot on the China Sea. In places it's still night but, in one part, the sun will come from a cloudbank behind us. I watch two crewmen play ping-pong then look up as one points in heavy English and declares *Is land!*’

I look up from my desk. It’s peak hour and my favourite black freighter’s sailing back to Sydney after weeks away at sea – daily commuters criss-crossing the harbour obliviously beside it. Their seeming ignorance cheers me and I kick off my slippers and caress the carpet.

‘I reached Tokyo and my dream was a Durrenmatt play acted on Kabuki stages, high and long as freeways at night. Someone was stalking me. A woman was there. A girl sipped from red glass in silhouette. Things were urgent. The city was a ship and shadows lunged and I panicked and ran to a cabin where I pushed a brass handle, locked a door and spun to see a rose-quilted room and a bed. A hand banged, a door gasped, air sucked and I suddenly saw it all from high up – a square box drenched in red. I couldn't risk seeing the room, or the sight of me reeling there. The door swelled and strained and broke then arched and splintered and became a bomb unleashing. But I escaped from it, bursting out through a cyclone beside the ship, crashing down right in the heart of Tokyo's raging night – onto my single futon mat – safe and sound and alone.’

This impromptu surge of memory. I write its words in long hand, then type them and pour them in, to see them pulse like waves down the pre-set margins of a silver screen. They become fluid and in each generation pulse further from their birth – heart, brain, blood-filled arm, pencil, computer – onto the slipping surface of a scrolling face, while the head in my mother’s tapestry looks at me from her fixed lattice – the jaw set, the gaze direct, the eyes unafraid of death.