

**Curtin University**

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**Aqua Profunda**

Biographical note:

Marie O'Rourke is a doctoral candidate in Creative Writing at Curtin University. Researching the quirks of memory through lyric essay, her writing pushes the boundaries of post-postmodern memoir. Marie's creative and critical work has appeared in *New Writing*, *Westerly* and *Australian Book Review* and is forthcoming in *a/b: Auto/Biography studies*.

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Plunge it in deep water: it comes up more beautiful. – Horace in *Odes* IV. iv.65

We are drawn from water; drawn back to it.

Sporting old sandshoes, we carry prawn nets, Primus lantern and stove from the station wagon. Soon we're huddled on scraps of sand, stepping over tufts of grey-green grass; riverbank sinking under the weight of our eskies and aluminium folding chairs.

I trust the ocean, its grit of shell and sand offering traction. This smooth riverbed silt unnerves me. Almost slippery underfoot, the river's tannic depths turn my insides as liquid as what surrounds me. I paddle awkwardly in a bloom of jellyfish. Harmless, I know, but their transparent selves scare me. (Apparently we spook them too: jellyfish can't feel pain, but become stressed if they're touched too much.)

It's the dads and older boys who go out, broad bodies disappearing in the deepening darkness. I watch them drift from the arc of gaslight, float into the inky black, away from sight. Imagining the silky twitch of creatures by their legs I shudder.

What do we do while we wait? I have no idea, no memory of the time between that watched disappearance and the potbellied net returning to shore, heavy and twitching with life; antennae, fin, glossy eye. Crouched over the catch, light held aloft, they sift trash from treasure, talking it up.

Soon ... *PRAWNS ARE READY!* Opaque orange crescents are heaped onto paper plates. Doused with vinegar. I can't join the feast, the fact of feet and carapace confronting in their intimacy. How could I eat something whose beady eye is still trained on me, staring me down? God, it might even be gazing back at the water.

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Water baby, they call me: if it's there, I'm in it. Sharp inhale of breath, fill of lungs, face a tightly gathered drawstring of muscle, holding air in and water out. Youngest of the family, often cast adrift as sisters, cousins, launch into a life beyond; water's a playmate, gently whispering in my ear. Hours pass tumbling, drifting, floating.

There's always a new challenge and I mark off my achievements in increments. Touch the floor – tick. Three underwater somersaults in a row – tick. Maybe I should I try for four?

Surfacing, I savour the giddy disorientation; feel so confused, yet somehow safe.

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Lie, listening, as voices come in waves, crashing through asbestos: wafer thin, that barrier between your bed and their nightly battlefield.

Hear feet scrambling to stand. Feel the thump of flesh against wall. See him weave past your doorway, fists clenched, sneering mouth. Taste blood as you bite lip; hold breath.

Eyes closed now. Imagine you're afloat in the sea, arms and legs starfished, the sun warming your face, body lifting and falling gently on the swell.

Relax. Breathe. Listen. Stacked in bunks, sisters' whispered reassurances will start to flow.

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Home is angry and airless, high summer heat trapped between the walls and red tin roof. Sometimes we escape, a tangle of people and dog in the station wagon, driving, windows wound down to catch any whiff of breeze moving between us.

Finally beachside and breathing deeply, lungs, limbs, muscles loosen under the ocean's soft salt breath. Fingers and toes absentmindedly digging in the still-warm sand, we loll in the velvety cool, a bag of Chokitos passed from hand to hand. The inky night surrounds us, only the white of the break line aglow.

Dad's first up, singlet peeled off, dusting sand from his hands. *C'mon. Nothin' better than a night swim.* Mum's anxious about sharks coming close to shore at night and my sisters paddle with her in the wash.

*Pfft! Just an old wives' tale, Jan! Not scared, are you, 'Rie?* His voice is a dare, inviting a pledge of allegiance.

I follow him into the waves. *Course not, Dad.* I gasp as the sand disappears from under my feet but with that first splash of water, the gentle *swoosh* in and out of my ears drowns out all other noises – and most thoughts. I slowly unclench my jaw.

Dad's different here too, his strong arms and rough, square hands guiding me through deep water, currents pulling and dragging below. Waves lift us up and down, the regular rhythm of the swell reassuring us both.

Together (alone) in our own liquid space, watery language fills ears and soothes, transforming real world sounds into something soft and calming. Here all voices have the same timbre: no sharp notes survive.

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Our childhood holidays centre on the site of a good catch, generally shack-filled towns where Dad's mate has a mate who has a mate with a boat. Jurien, Lancelin, Dongara, Greenhead; jetty, caravan, beach, boat, our daily rotation.

On Rottneest we ride to the end of the island laden with rods, tackle boxes, food and drink. A big day out. I scramble across rocks to the no man's land where sea and earth meet, interchange easily, depending on the tide. Shoes off, toes gripping the porous sandstone, the rough reassures me that I still have a hold.

Dad baits my hand line, I pull in a herring every now and then. Nan and Aunty Haze take position further back, a flat boulder their workbench. They kill, gut, scale, rinse; hands covered in blood and innards, giggling with the thrill of self-sufficiency.

*Careful!* The constant cry, Mum and Aunty Julie afraid we'll go over the edge and be swept into the blue. Nervous by nature, I'm somehow calm as I perch on the precipice, lean out over the turquoise, navy and white foaming below. An occasional splash of my feet reminds me just how close it is. My face is damp with the spray, my mouth salty, I'm mesmerised by the soft breathy growl of the sea. What if ... ?

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Of course, you almost drowned at the age of four, uncle's pool, the whole extended family standing by. Woozy with achievement, having just mastered 'forward somersault in floaty ring', your muscles still hold the memory of the frenzied eggbeater of arms and legs needed to convince that sharp edged ring of hot pink PVC to move from its ninety degree flat. A moment upside down, wet legs bitten by the air, constant churning of limbs to complete the manoeuvre.

Four, five, six times, you were victorious. *Look at me, Mum, look at me!* Clever girl indeed. But then ... head down and unable to roll back up. It took a few moments of legs flailing in the air, arms beating up a whirl of bubbles before panic gripped as tightly as the ring around your waist (can't get up, can't slip down and through). Eyes opened to the chlorine sting, you saw cousins' legs, treading water, close but too far away to grab.

It seemed forever before fingers grabbed ankle and arm, lifted you dripping and gasping above the blue. Aunty Julie, clothes drenched – your lifesaver. Metres away everyone else stood chatting, unaware of the newfound gravitas of your game.

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At home our pool stands barely four foot above ground, aluminium finely-pleated sides. It once seemed so deep, a luxuriant excess of water. More like a very big bath now – or that fancy spa thing Linda's parents just put in – so there's nothing for it but to simply loll. Sometimes I float face down, feeling for dents and pocks where the liner has moulded to the hollow of the sand, poke my finger around to make more. Sometimes I just go limp and play dead.

More often I'm belly up, back rubbing against the brilliant blue PVC liner of the floor, swoosh of bubbles in my ears. From here I squint, through liquid to the world beyond, the glorious purple blur of our jacaranda's arms stretched and reaching blindly for the sky, sun.

In winter the water will sit stagnant, chlorinator off, untended, rich with the smell of rotting jacaranda leaves. Blue will cloud to green then brown, midges and mosquitos breeding in the brackish calm, biding their time until attack. I'm allergic, and bites will quickly flare to angry red welts. Barbecues, outdoor life will mean the taste of Aeroguarded air biting the tongue, tainting every mouthful.

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The year I turn thirteen, my father leaves. He calls from six-hundred kilometres away, to tell his wife of twenty-four years that he's 'crossed the floor' to another woman, and won't be coming home.

He's something of an old hand at floor-crossing, I'm soon to hear, though he's only dallied there before, never made the locational shift, the great migration. Mum sobs, alternate waves of sadness and anger crashing over her, through, onto her sister. Words flow constantly between them; so many words.

I learn to measure their weight as I stand in the doorway, or scrunch onto the couch nearby. Confirmation of what I'd increasingly sensed in Mum's clenched jaw, sideways looks, alternately outraged and wounded tones. Dad's a cheat. Philanderer. Adulterer.

Ladies' man. My vocabulary of extramarital misbehaviour expands and expands as our family contracts.

That summer we spend most of our time at my aunty's house, fed, watered and nurtured by Julie and her loving calm. Mum cries and I swim. I swim all day, until my skin's wrinkled and my vision blurred. As we eat barbecue, ankles crossed under the jarrah picnic bench, I marvel at the fuzzy aura of light surrounding everything. The ordinary becomes mystical.

While my mother folds into herself, eyes looking elsewhere, hands wringing or distractedly pulling things apart, I learn to hold my breath. By the end of that summer I've mastered ten laps of my aunty's pool without surfacing. I open my eyes, welcoming the sting of salt water and chlorine. Not that I see anything clearly – it's all a blur – but I vaguely sense where I am headed. My ears fill with the swish and whisper of the water pushing around my arms and legs as I frog-kick through.

At the breakfast bar, on the couch, Mum cries. Or just sits. Staring. At nothing.

Diving down, I feel the strangely welcome press of the water. Squeezing my head from the outside, it creates an improbable equilibrium. I plunge deeper, stay longer, push further through. Claim the light-headed confusion that a lack of oxygen brings.

My oldest sister stops eating: for her, the surety of exposed hipbones under hand, spine meeting the resistance of furniture. The middle one disappears – friends, alcohol, a nightclub's haze and thump helping reassure her she is real. Alive. Just.

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His thongs stay in the middle of our doormat, edges curled. Trip hazard. Dirt ingrained into the fine gradations of rubber: heel, ball, five toes, his weight impressed upon the surface. Standing on the threshold, he claims the right of entry long after he's officially gone.

Even as we try to steady on our new course, Dad's on the phone, or sometimes seated, smoking in the kitchen. Well, this is still his house, isn't it? Why should he have to find somewhere else to stay when he's in town? My sisters have jumped ship, moved on. They're building new homes with old boyfriends, so now just Mum and I are left treading water in his wake.

It's less than a year before Dad decides he wants back – this new life isn't quite working as expected. Mum's refusal stuns both him and her.

Wading through the old albums, Dad removes 'his' photos, fading Polaroids of their young love, and spreads them out on the kitchen table for me to see. Misty-eyed, he shuffles through Jan and Frank in front of Lesmurdie Falls, on a mate's boat, at Scarborough Beach, the place where they met – always watery blue, the backdrop to these smiling faces. Minutes later he's threatening, accusing. *Who the fuck else would want you, anyway?*

Ever changeable, overwhelming, this man and his moods; emotions in perpetual motion. Back and forth, for years it flows, shifting shape, this father/daughter husband/wife thing.

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Suddenly you're 21, an undergraduate sporting a diamond ring, lists and plans written in between assignments. Dad's paying, reception is booked: nestled close to one of your old prawning spots, the backdrop of boats, glistening river and city lights, idyllic. Menu selected. Cake made. 'Blue Moon' roses traced by florist. Dress of velvet, ribbon, a froth of tulle, now hangs in the front room.

Feeling foolish even with this audience of two (yet thankfully spared the ignominy of sharing the moment with a babe in arms), water drips down your forehead. You hold on to Greg's smile as the priest's deep voice intones, grim and expressionless. Express service, you are ticking the last of the boxes before marrying next week.

Cleansed of sin, Father is welcoming you to the fold, promising salvation from the horrors of limbo. No more aimless floating between heaven and earth, loveless: you are special; you are wanted; you are welcome. A fine addition to the flock.

*Loved. Cherished. Worth saving.* The words flow through your mind as chrisms and water mingle, matting your fringe. Greg squeezes your hand and you start to cry.

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A collection starts, mermaids adorning the spaces of my new home and life. Intrigued by the notion of a life straddling sea and air, I appreciate the lure of the underwater realm. It starts with Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* and soon sirens swim over our walls, mugs, mantelpiece and books.

Mum makes me a mermaid doll, with long brown curls, a deep blue sparkling tail. I adore it. But there's one for Mia and Lisa too – it seems my sisters are now both collecting, their shelves heavy with sparkling fins and flowing locks. *Come, on, love. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery*, Mum says ... Still, I feel uneasy. Water has always been *my* thing.

A visitor comments on my collection, reminding me of the dark side to these beguiling beauties; their taste for destruction. Explains also how Andersen's little mermaid faced a more fraught path to eternal happiness than Disney's. Had to endure three hundred years of purgatory to earn her soul.

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Back from the bush, Dad's keen to check out our puppy and 'new' old house. Crouching on the back lawn while our dogs play, he talks retaining walls.

Sunday dinner? Maybe a walk with the dogs? A frantic Staffy pup and an old Red Heeler, Padraic and Tuffy soon become unlikely yet staunch allies, each loop of the nearby lake, each meal testing this newly formed version of 'us'.

Up the coast at a dog beach we sit on sand, swim and bodysurf. Dad washes Tuffy before they head home, mindful of the possible sting or itch. I watch jealously as he cradles her under the tap, rinsing and smoothing fur, sluicing her with water, a stream of admiration and gentle reassurances flowing just as steadily.

Wiping salty water from my cheeks, I'm unsure if it's tears or the sea. They taste the same.

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Our first child, the second, then third – those years strangely blur together, like watercolours muddling. I become 'Mum', Dad becomes 'Nonno', standing guard patiently behind the swing set, pressing sweet treats into tiny palms, reading stories and tucking in blankets. Tightly. A person I can barely recognise but have always hoped to see, Dad is somehow smaller, quieter, even as he grows in this role. His body's hard lines soften until he's almost blurred at the edges.

That last Christmas before it all implodes I buy him a beach towel: three shades of blue, always his favourite colour and mine. Stylised palm tree, lighthouse, sun: it is manly and optimistic.

In a year's time, packing up his house, I will discover it neatly folded, tag intact, unused. Saved for best. Taking it home to wash and use, searching for Dad's signature smell of Old Spice, diesel and sweat, 'Sea Breeze' fabric softener (mine) will be all I can find.

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Doctor, blood test, scan, specialist: in the end, cancer penned the script and cast our roles; respite care suddenly palliative.

Asthma resurfaces, then my first panic attack. That sudden removal of air leaves me disoriented at first, confused and blank. But soon, in this state of permanent twilight, I learn to hold my breath before it hits; clench my core and batten down. It seems I've been training for this my whole life.

Our final scenes play out with sun streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows, squinting in the face of a sparkling river, the cruel glint of stainless steel. Beyond the glass, birds wheel and swoop through the air, kids bomby from a jetty, luxurious yachts and cruisers lie in wait. *Always loved boats. Would've liked me own*, he smiles. We don't mention the deal he did on a drunken whim. It barely counts. 'Thruppence' only left the driveway a couple of times before filling with grimy water in the rain, silently rotting away.

From the corner of my eye I see schoolboys getting ready to row, an eight hoisted on young, broad shoulders. As gunwale bites clavicle, I feel the weight, the expectation. Shell slipping under smooth hands, feet stumbling with responsibility, they're struggling to get a grip but determined not to show the strain. All jokes and smiles, I can almost hear the gibing. But it's all about strength. Control.

*How's me luck, ending up by the river, hey, 'Rie?* I turn toward Dad's breathless exhalation. Luck? Living? No. They're not the right words. But grabbing his hand, I squeeze tight.

My son keeps up a steady stream of chatter, telling Nonno all about the car brands he saw on his way in, the new Lego he has at home. Replies come, but today they're brief. Dad's eyes are barely open.

I shut my eyes, lean back in the padded recliner and let their voices wash over me.

## Research Statement

### Research background

Nebulous and hard to define, the lyric essay steals qualities from lyric poetry and personal essay; focuses on 'expanding the moment and seeing what the moment holds' (Aldrich 2009) rather than narrative line and logic. 'Aqua Profunda' is taken from my current creative work-in-progress, a collection of lyric essays which strives to record personal past in a way which embodies the experiences, anxieties and understandings of our post-postmodern world; a world where Tall and D'Agata suggest we're drawn to the lyric 'because it seems less possible (and rewarding) to approach the world through the front door, through the myth of objectivity.'

### Research contribution

As Eakin points out, any shift in our conception of memory should have important consequences for our thinking about autobiography and identity (2000, p 291). Advances in cognitive neuroscience, memory studies and the field of so-called 'Neuro Lit. Crit.' have questioned the relationship between an actual event and how we remember, then write about it. My work springs from this discussion, showing how the lyric essay's characteristic reticence and 'looseness'— fragmentation, repetition and disjointed organisation—can honour what we know of the partial and fluid quality of memory. The form of lyric essay is presented here as one which might honour Lejeune's autobiographical pact and the notion that memoir is 'true' even as it exhibits an awareness of autobiographic memory's limitations.

### Research significance

This work explores those matters of identity and familial connection which lie at the heart of memoir. It also opens up a conversation as to whether fragments taken from memory, explored through symbol, metaphor, blank space and silence, may tell a more 'complete' story than the neat narrative progression of traditional memoir. Well-established in North America yet still in its fledgling stages within Australia, this piece suggests lyric essay's potential when writing about and from memory.

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