Book of numbered days: a sequence of poems, Rapa Nui / Easter Island, July 2012

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Del Pacifico Sudeste

Tangler of twine and fishing wire, we
have woken more than once
to the sound of you—salt-eyed, krill-enriched
turtle-hungry—we have launched

1 GREGORY O’BRIEN is a poet, painter, essayist and art curator. He is 2015 Stout Memorial Fellow at the Stout Research Institute, Victoria University of Wellington. His recent books include a collection of poems inspired by travels in the vast oceanic space between New Zealand and Chile, Whale Years, and a book about New Zealand photography for younger readers, See What I Can See (both published by Auckland University Press, 2015).
our boats across your scarred
back, thrown our quivering lines
beyond your curved horizon.

It is emptiness that fills
this earth

hollowness this sky, but
when I think of you, first
I think of Neruda's swaying captains

on their swaying hill. Following sea, running
sea, great sea of the unmade mind
you are always between
islands, like this song, entangled
in your own lines—

one part water, two parts

sky—my distant head
your unfathomable body.
At Tongariki

We reach out
and touch
what is forever
and what is forever
beyond reach.

Gravestone

The same gulls wheeling above the cemetery
at Hanga Roa
trawling for
the names of the dead. Each cry
a half-remembered inscription
lifted high above the headland.
Gregory O'Brien

Tangerine

Amelia sends me a star chart. No,
I am mistaken, it is a map of underwater volcanoes—
a handbook of invisible seamounts

above which the heart
sends out its research vessels
to collect samples and specimens, to record

places of departure and arrival, this
interminable shaking. My botanist friend, she
questions my deliberations.

The banana, she tells me, is hardly a plant
let alone a tree. Like ginger
it is a _perennial herb_.

I devote the rest of the day to
eating mandarins, at least
I think they are mandarins.
South East Pacific

A hurried sky, quickening sea, a voice

Curved planks of the sea turtle, a voice

The cemetery dogs, a voice

A fishing boat called M. Jesus Joe, a voice

A baked chicken plucked from a lawn, a voice

And another voice, always another voice

   in reply.

On Easter Island

The great voyages of Polynesian history, of Cook
and Laperouse and Thor Heyerdahl's Kon-Tiki

   as nothing compared
to the everyday transit, by Southern Pacific Gyre
of one bucket, a left-footed jandal and two plastic containers
marked 'Property of Sanfords, South Island, New Zealand'.

Apparition of the head of a Chilean dictator as a moai, Easter Island

Bonegrinder, toothpuller
president of all
our sleepless nights
the eyeless moai of Rapa Nui

stare down the prison-blocks
of the years, your horse-drawn casket
still churning dust, a mound
of steaming manure overshadowing

La Moneda. From this far province,
we wish you a bad night's sleep,
Generalissimo, may our
volcanic unrest forever rattle

your antique limbs and arthritic heart, may you be
dissembled, chicken-pecked, horse-
trodden, never to be made whole again
in this or any other universe.
Elegy

The disappeared
are always

with us, it is emptiness
fills the earth.

Luck Bird

My feast day an occasion of some solemnity.
It arrives, as any other, by sea—my nesting place
and vantage point, from where I behold
this world's wonders—a black cat
eating a cucumber, the magnetic navel
of a woman, a boy with dog meat
between his teeth—and the song
allocated each of them, the accompanying guitar
made from the shell of a crab or turtle
or armadillo. And, mindful of
the implications of this, on the far mainland,
ever cautious, a crab, a turtle and an armadillo.
The first night awoke
to a lizard crowing

like a rooster, a card game
that sounded

like rain on a tin roof...
a dog had fallen

from a tree, a house was
built upon a horse.

Eight-stringed and night-long
strummed, you prove yourself

a necessary accompaniment on these
largest of evenings. Bigger
than a fish-scale, smaller than the sky
how do your songs describe you?

Wider than a sardine, narrower
than the sea. Sing to us

of how, in this world of untimely things,
a man might also be defined—

half way between a grass skirt
and a headstone, a mollusc

and an ocean-liner. Mid-way between
a hammer and wind-tossed

palm. No, upon reflection
do not tell us, Guitar. Sing instead

only of your strings and not
of how this world is strung.
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Headstone lamps, Hanga Roa

Midnight’s luminescence, hilltop graveyard
speckled with solar-powered bulbs
  glowing jellyfish, beacons
for the renavigation of
moonlit depths. Here on the sea floor
of the slender-fingered ones
  we swim upwards
the deep sea creatures we once were
we are again.

Conversation between a stone head on Easter Island and the weather balloon, Raoul Island

1.
Stone head, cliff face
you would have us
bury our noses in
rich volcanic soil or vanish

beneath a whale-trammelled
sea. Wedged between one world
and the next, you measure time
as we are measured
by it. Grand-
father clock, waist-deep
in the quarry of the self, you are
both a man's idea of a stone

and a stone's idea
of a man, your unfathomable
body swallowed whole
by your distant, proximate head.

2.
Wind-bag, balloon-brain
each morning miraculously
reborn, adrift
in the updrafts, convections

we tether our words
to you, that we might be free
of them, that they might
plummet, mid-ocean, into

the impossibility of our retrieving
you. In return, we praise your
aptitude, Icarus-bird, maestro of the moment
scale model of this finite planet
Gregory O'Brien

pale, woebegone, you are expelled
from this incomparable blueness, summarised
made smaller, enfolded inside
your falling.

Moai, Rapa Nui

This is our place.
You can't touch mourning

it is mourning
touches you.

It's gone. It's here. The life
everlasting, the life

that suddenly
never was.
The non-disappeared, Hanga Roa

Monthly, the gravestones
are replenished, overwritten
in felt pen or chalk

the occasional daub
of white paint; at times
a name will change
or be revised, contested. No matter

we are all in this
together—on this seaward incline
overlooking

the afterlife. But all we can see
from here
lights of incoming
fishing boats.
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The zoo above our heads

When the creaking, bird-heavy clouds
above Anakena shuffle

    their electrical selves, the nerves

be frayed. I follow the flitting neurons
as far back
as Santiago Zoo

    on its hilltop perch, its low-flying
population of chimpanzees with names
like Nixon and Kissinger

    and the monkey with
the shiniest buttons, Milton Friedman. Some evenings

    it is as if the contents
of the Santiago zoo have

fallen upon our heads. Yet, here on Rapa Nui, how mightily

    the mighty have already fallen
that ruinous
brigade of gods and ancestors

    the deflated balloon-man Pinochet
and King George Tupou V, all of them

    face-down, upended
and presiding over all
the blue and green eggs, the aerial
chicken coops of Rapa Nui
and the turtle-sun rattling the cages.

At Orongo

My stone
head

your earthly
body

our ocean.

A children's song, Hanga Roa

Fishing Boat, Little Fish
the swell is always taller
than you, the waves
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more numerous. Thrown around
in any weather, you drink
far too much. Fishing Boat

Little Fish, you trawl your own
shadow. It is the plenitude of fishes
that keeps you afloat,

the constellations and electrical
gravestones of Hanga Roa that guide you
home. Fishing Boat

Little Fish, your family
above, your family
below—creature of air

and water, the oceans of the world
are yours to ply, but today
your only catch will be
    this song,
The sky above Rapa Nui

Salt-grinder of stars
peppergrinder of night
what is it you listen for?

Groan of a straining
oarsman, mispronunciation
of the Spanish language

by the waves at Anakena
my wide-awake head
your sleeping body?

Church at Hanga Roa

And so, Easter Island, I go out, but not so far
as to lose sight of you; I go out

not so far as to
dream. And I dream
not so as to leave your body
but to remain there
as one might
    a sloping field.

The well-angled stone skims across
water
    but labours on land

as does man, that
hollow egg or sinking ship
    palm-brained, run aground

yet somehow
always with us
    and in us. Remember

the Luck Bird, installed
crown-like on the Virgin's head—
    unholy, yet somehow

blessed. We are all
such fortunate souls
    such eggs the Luck Bird

    lays for us.