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

Gregory O'Brien¹

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

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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.

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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

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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.

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Hanga Roa

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.

Guitar, Hanga Roa

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

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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 flittering 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

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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.