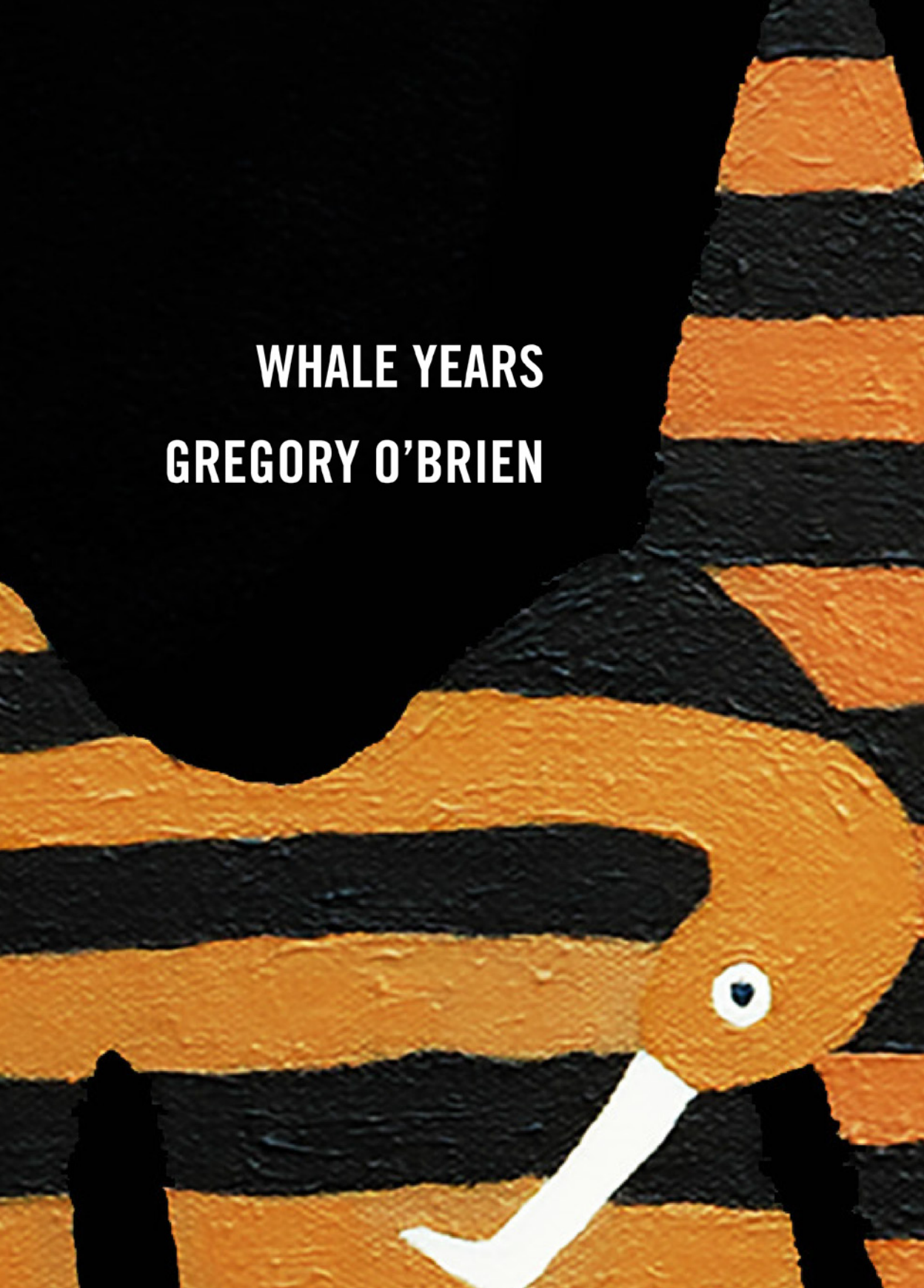


**WHALE YEARS**  
**GREGORY O'BRIEN**



Wide-ranging poet Gregory O'Brien surveys the lyric heart of an ocean in memorable, musical, moving lines.

*Two poets on a headland, mid-survey  
might pause suddenly and say  
will this be your whale, or mine?*

Between 2011 and 2014, poet and artist Gregory O'Brien found himself following the migratory routes of whales and seabirds across vast tracts of the South Pacific Ocean, resulting in work that O'Brien describes as 'acts of devotion – a homage to a series of remarkable locations and to the natural histories of those places'. In three parts, this collection stretches across the Pacific, following whale-roads, weather balloons and sons at sea, charting historical explorations and recent disasters such as the grounding of the *Rena*, along with other Pacific realisms – the 'Pacific trash vortex', the wavering democracy of Tonga, the political history of Chile. These poems are an exploration of outlying islands, the ocean that lies between them, and the whale-species and sea birds found there. From Waihi looking east and Valparaiso looking west, O'Brien surveys the cultural heart and health of an ocean in memorable, musical, moving lines.

Gregory O'Brien is an independent writer, teacher, painter, literary critic and art curator. He has written many books of poetry, fiction, essays and commentary. Recent publications with Auckland University Press include *Beauties of the Octagonal Pool* (2012), *A Micronaut in the Wide World: The Imaginative Life and Times of Graham Percy* (2011) and the multi-award-winning introductions to art *Welcome to the South Seas* and *Back and Beyond*.







## *Raoul Island*

By frigate and bird  
we came ashore

fresh-footed on the swaying  
headland, by balloon boat

and a piece of  
yellow twine. Here we were

set down, buffered in  
moss and lichen, riding

the undulations of the seaward lawn – and this  
was our unrest. We walked

the edible path, an orchard of oranges  
underfoot, mushrooms

like satellite dishes tilted  
at the sky. We followed

the flight paths of petrel and red-tailed  
tropic bird, of grey ternlet

and masked booby – and theirs was  
the song the island sang.

*Whale Survey, Raoul Island, with Rosemary Dobson*

Two poets on a headland, mid-survey  
might pause suddenly and say  
will this be your whale, or mine?

Moving, accordingly, from one observation area  
to the next, a whale is 'handed over'.  
Please take it. No, you first.

Early morning spent 'getting the eye in'  
velocity of clouds, sea conditions noted.  
Breaching, logging, travelling, the Pacific

divided between Coral Bay and Tropic Bird Face,  
Bomb Shed, Hutchies Bluff and Blindspot. Later  
Rosemary observed to a friend

from the sharpest point of her triangulation:  
If I stand still enough, I can see Wolverine Rock,  
a water spout and, westerly, one cow and calf.

## *The captain of the Rena on Astrolabe Reef*

He might have been sharpening up on the sea, as the sea was sharpening its points. A Number Two, he was told. The crew was looking sharp, to a point.

From point to point of a chart – and all points north of the Point of Saying Goodbye. A man goes out on a rib – a point of departure. A point upon which

they disagreed or agreed to differ. A spike in the weather another barbed or pointed front approaching. This time a Number Four Sea. There were other points

of interest, distraction or contention. A compass or protractor with its pointed readiness, a line following the point of a pencil from this to that

point. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, the point being a pointed hull run aground on a pointed reef, if you get my drift, what is the point in that?

DARK TREE

WEKA REMOVALISTS

flying boat & fish

BIRD WATCH

THE HORNS

AS IF ASCENDING

THE LEARNED TREES

RADIO BIRD MAN

A broad coat for windage

FLYING BULLET BAY

BIRD FEATHER OF THE GREAT INJUSTICE

FLOWERPOT

GLORY

CURIOUS HAND

ADMIRAL FARM

SCURVY GRASS  
SOWTHISTLE  
SPEARGRASS

THE CLEARS

THE CLEARS

Aeroglyphs

OLD MAN REEF

PETRE BAY BY LEFT-FOOTED JANDYAL

TO SEA

WALK HIM UP

THE SWIMMING HORSE

LAND LINE

CHATHAM ISLAND ICE PLANT

SAND MILK-WEED

NAVEL OF A DELIGHTFUL CREATURE

BEACHED MR BONES BLEACHED WEATHER-WIZENED

CLINKER

THINGS LOST AT SEA

BLIND JIM'S

SUMMER OF INFLATABLE GIFTS

RIBBON WOOD

AUTOMATIC LIGHT

SHORE SPURGE

THE NURSES

DATE LINE

CHATHAM ISLAND BUTTON DAISY

THE FORTY FOURS

TINY RUINS

SO TO SPEAK

UMBRELLA FERN

SHARKING

ALL THE RED ADMIRALS

LONG BOAT

POINT WEEDING

elongated day

LAGOON

ISLAND FACTORY

HIGH SEA

SHORT STORY

THE HORSES

LATE AUNT

AS IF DESCENDING

LONG LIFE

AIR TAXI

the clears



## *Whale years*

*for Phil Dadson*

### **South-west Pacific**

Ocean-sound, what is it  
you listen for?

### **L'Esperance**

Anchorstone, sea urchin  
waterlogged instrument, tunes  
a shrimp whistles.

### **Rekohu/Chatham Island**

If there is  
a moon  
it is carved into  
a dark tree. If  
there is  
a tree. But  
there is always  
an ocean.

### **Orange supply, Raoul Island**

Bird rattle of  
a cyclone-tossed greenness  
ever-decreasing orchard.

### **Tongatapu**

Your eyes were canoes, your brows  
outriggers, your hair a wind-tossed  
palm, and your bones  
an ocean-polished whiteness.

### **Orongo, Rapa Nui**

Easy on the oar  
Steady the sail  
Hold the thought  
Let go the hand

## Easter Fracture Zone

In the book of the ocean each wave  
is recorded, but the lives of men are left  
where they lie.

## Plumeria rubra, Tongatapu

aFter  
spRing  
cAme  
aN  
anGular  
musIc  
Piano  
Accordianist  
fiNgering  
everythIng

## Quintay, Chile

Everything I heard or  
did not hear: the ocean  
peeled back, wave by  
wave, sigh of a once  
whale-laden ocean.

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