

TO FRANCIS WEBB

dreams rode out of you  
birds into the sky  
fear moved into you  
twisting its knife  
long slow days of  
harsh golden light  
as for your imagined explorers  
a journey over broken rocks  
a pilgrimage to a buried shrine  
through stinging white radiance  
the electric insistence of flies

your Sturt rode near blind to his willed goal  
towards visions of the dead heart blossoming  
and suffered the sun like stone upon his back  
— light as always the heaviest world to bear

dreading, hungering after the final loneliness  
Leichhardt tracked its wastes with animal cunning  
threatening the void with rabid *ubermensch* rage  
wrote off defeat as a conspiracy but won out at the end  
when Australia, the desert continent, great mind  
of loneliness itself, bared and embraced his bones

Eyre endured all, accepted all, but felt at last  
only how the sand abraded, blistered his spirit  
the wiry harsh elegance of scrub scalded his hands  
dry hot winds tearing a man from his courage, that final  
drop of moisture quivering, evaporating on parched lips;  
so each footstep was a desert, a desert each footstep;  
and what could be the journey's meaning then? the journey  
became a question with only a question mark at its end

with heart and hand you traced these maps, touched  
and tested all burdens, lived their journeys from within  
made words into haunting landscapes of myth alive with  
the voiceless songs of desperate wandering men;

and always you heard  
the rhythmic pulsing of the inland sea, the oceanic roar  
surging inside the shell: whispers, prophecies of peace  
to burning visionary minds  
of healing waters at the end of search