On the Road to Erewhon

_The Author wishes it to be understood that Erewhon is pronounced as a word of three syllables, all short — thus, E-re-whon. — Samuel Butler, preface to Erewhon, 1872._

Once past the icefalls and the teeth of noon, already descending the pass, out of a cloud blackened by lightning, if mirrors can spell and maps don’t lie, that’s the Erewhon road, the ambush can’t be far. Gigantic statues shock you down to size. Before the Hyksos their senate debated what’s to be done with you. They have mouths the mountain blast vociferates in, a people had need of these or these of themselves were the need _causa sui_. Inhuman syllables, harmony that howls and hails, halting you. Patches of old snow squeak underfoot. Goat-tracks, lost writings.

_Six or seven times larger than life, of great antiquity, worn and lichen grown. They were ten in number . . . I saw that their heads had been hollowed. Fear, pain, hate, cruelty once chopped into stone stare out again, each head a sort of organ-pipe, so that their mouths should catch the wind._ Earthly, unaccompanied voices empty wind into wind, mist into mist, rock into rock, these ten
commandments. Eight of them still seated, 
two had fallen. The God who thinks aloud's 
the worst, your own shadow's a friendlier 
fright. Physical, superhumanly 
malvolent faces look back, too

hard for your nature to bear, only 
the legs and how fast they can carry 
you the hell out of here as though one 
of them would rush after me and grip 
me . . . If it were just one of those dreams

where running gets you nowhere! This is 
the mirrored map, the Erewhon road, 
where you came from is where you’re going, 
the hammers in the brain keep time with 
feet pounding downhill, the rivers are

swollen in the mind’s eye. Back there, in 
the cloud the trumpeting heads perform 
their own Te Deum. Panicky antiphons 
die down in the blood. You can shiver 
suddenly, for no reason at all.

ALLEN CURNOW