

## Crossing the Desert\*

This is the landscape of prophecy the ancient Namib  
tilted sand from the mountains desert upon desert  
from Okahandja Okazize Wilhelmstal Karibib

the N71 where the squat graves of the Mahareros assert  
the honour of rebellion by a deep dry riverbed  
where the municipal pool's wired in on blue alert

where towering koppies named for kaisers long dead  
helmeted in ironstone clad in the yellow braid of acacia  
commemorate colonial massacres and the railhead

the low of cattle now the meat-rack of Namibia  
this is carcase land where blood is cheaper than rain  
turning west we travel through rocks like a brazier

the tyres fry on the tar the highway leads where they came  
there are crows which mean carrion bugs on the windshield  
we are warned of kudu vaulting from Francoisfontein

over the foot-and-mouth fence the embankment the four-wheeled  
vehicle like a capsule comfortable against the descent  
down an escarpment hiding nothing all revealed

but once the marble hills fade the bushes relent  
and only stones flower and the grasses thin  
into the rubble of eternity piled and spent

there is Usakos corrugated white and buckled tin  
and Ebony Arandis Rössing where the sky's red  
Spitzkuppe to steer by on the planet's rim

\* Between the capital of Windhoek and the Atlantic resort of Swakopmund  
lies the driest desert, the Namib, after which Namibia is named.

at 80 kms an hour there I lifted my eyes from the dead  
world into the next world saw instead of tortured lava flows  
new courses geysers wells channels a fountainhead

there where we have been eroded and worn destroyed arose  
exactly what mad visionaries see in the wilderness  
a celestial city welcoming wide wondrous I suppose

by definition it must contain all qualities we in our viciousness  
can never maintain floating as in a dream  
caressed with the perfect hand of gentleness

I gather it held all knowledge all peace everything supreme  
in short no armaments no sirens no hatred no police  
it was the only place I knew where things were what they seem

I call upon Doris Lessing St John William Blake Nongqawuse  
even without God they're all the same these heavenly projections  
seen by prophets disgusted with the long tyranny of woes

when will this empire fall at last release subjection  
when in the name of those who first challenged the status quo  
did humankind first conjure this alternative perfection?

turning left a few degrees we go where we have to go  
a Coke sign a palm-tree the sea-breeze rolling down mist  
and in Swakopmund we find a tourist bungalow

tonight we swim in the sea drink beer get pissed  
Eve they say rose from Adam's rib Christ from a herder's crib  
we have crossed the desert to pink dunes foggy damp and blessed.

STEPHEN GRAY