

## 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*  
*malevolent* 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