

THE LIFE OF CAVES

Slowly his eyes adjust to the sun...Plato: The Republic

Sleeping in caves with lingering
drift of woodsmoke. The rain droning
outside on pebble and leaf,
your dogs slumbering afoot, coals,
shifting in the slow campfire. Here
dreams crumble too, like cooling embers
in the night's lean hours before our
waking. The strength rises slowly
in numbed limbs until from shelter
of the cavemouth you must step out
in brave sunlight to what awaits.

Many times we have journeyed back to seek
treasure in such caves. Often in darkness
an inheritance may be found among
detritus of our cave companions—teeth
and bones of course, so stubborn to the last.
Yet our artefacts of chipped stone or wood
polished to a sheen are scribed sometimes
with the very first encryptions. Human
desire to mystify the universe
evokes dark powers greater than we had
hoped to summon. Posterity's new truths?

Look to the glitter of gold specks in dark
hollows, among salt lakes and salmon gums
of those landscapes where my home-town
was named—after a constellation far more
brightly blazing than any glint of gold. Yet
to prospectors Riseley and Toomey showed
reefs of lesser gold sparks crusting the white
rock among blue-grey western woodlands.
Thus I was to find my own birthplace there,
among the stricken quartz, pale as my face.

In monoliths of old Yilgarnia
are granite hollows. Yet at Murchison's
Walga rock I learned respect for our long
co-existence with caves. On such remote walls
for millennia hands have been outlined
with blown spatter of white-clay; ochre
and red glyphs of honoured prey—numbat, quoll,
wallaby, euro. And the maps of homelands
scribed in coded charcoal: the waterholes,
resting places and other sacred sites.

All over the world we have had to learn
to step out from assured shelters, birth
places; be brave in the sun's blaze of light.