Central Australia May 1993

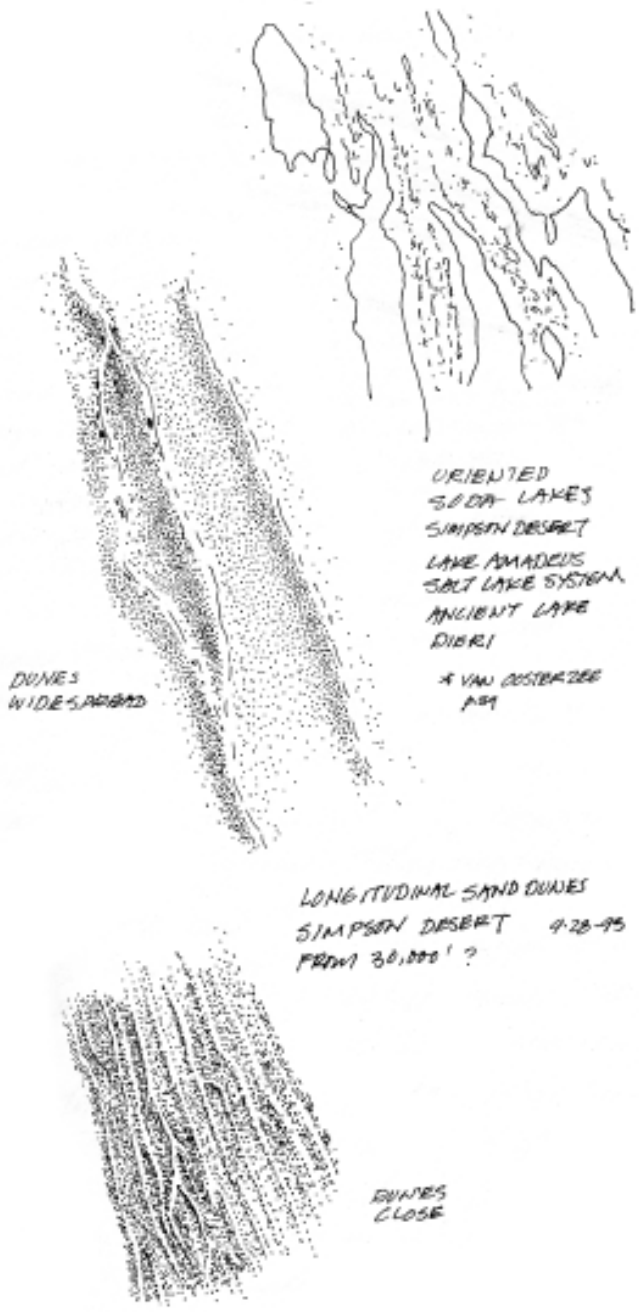
Aerial View of the Simpson Desert

Australian Airlines flight 059
Ayres Rock and Alice Springs
to Sydney.

Tired tourists watch light comedy
or play cards
at thirty thousand feet
while the open red heart
of the oldest land
slips past below.

Simpson Desert dune fields
bedeviled the Sturt expedition.
Stoney gibber plains crippled camels
but, like heavenly beings,
safe and air-conditioned,
we see the dunes below
as rills of rust
or sandblasted grain
in discarded lumber.

The veined dunes fork
like the branching of the mulga bush,
even and attenuate
or swirling like burlwood;
perhaps they are fine roots
left to dry by Aboriginal herbalists
yet they join horizon to horizon.

Brown ridges thrust
where the grain erupts
or amber sap congeals
and spalls in the sun.

Glitter of siliceous schist
and crystalline quartzite
is dulled by distance.
You look hard to see
grey-green dots,
lichen spoor on barn boards
or the dot painting
of the Arrente people,
in tops of coolbah trees
in flood plains
or mulga on deep red-earth.