

## Of Shearing

It always starts with phone calls —  
Dad and the contractor hammering  
out the details — and he's still  
refusing to take on the shearer  
who hamstrung a prize ram  
years ago.      Then, a week later,

we kids are hanging out as the team  
piles out of rust buckets into quarters  
just cleared of dead flies.      After,

it's a race against dusk to fetch in  
and yard the sheep. Usually, it's Dad,  
walking, or in the ute, or Mum  
riding Oaky, ranging behind, or skirting  
the tail to herd would be escapees  
back into the mob.      Then,

for a week to ten days, it's traipsing  
after the shearers to the shed, leaving  
crooked trails in the frost.      Inside,

it's all grassy breaths and dust  
motes floating through yellow  
slatted by jarrah beams; high  
whines from the comb and cutter  
grinders; and everything's  
thrumming to the hard beat

of the Chamberlain hooked to a leather  
belt turning flywheels, rods and cogs,  
driving the shears.      Some sheep

panic when gates are slammed back,  
but most just suffer the twist of head,  
being dragged out onto the board  
where morning, staccato as the rhythm  
set by the young gun, races on until  
his first fifty's done.      Then

handpieces fall as one to the floor  
with dull clunks, shearers unbend  
burning backs,      wipe

red mugs with oily rags, head to the bales  
where tea's set, sit slumped, chomping  
and slurping, rolling durries, smoking,  
or, if Mum's here, sticking them  
behind ears to smoke outside, watching  
Dad do the count.      And so,

days melt into dusks; into dawns  
leaping crisp from behind she-oaks

and eucalypts and time flattens

as bales rise and rise, forming castles,  
caves, aeroplane launch pads,  
until suddenly the last hogget's done,  
the last bale's trucked, and silence falls,  
drawing us kids back into the humdrum  
'til the next season rousts us out again.