

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.