WAITING ON A FIRE

The sluggish breezes barely stir the soupy, smoke tinged air,
the hazy sun is like a moon that shouldn't still be there.
The family sits in quiet calm, or so they'd have you think,
and say inconsequential things, and pour another drink.
The drumming of Grandma's fingers beats the droning of the flies;
the phone-calls answered, "Yes, we're great;" the people telling lies.
They've worked and farmed here all their life, you'd never call them liar,
so make allowance for them today, they're waiting on a fire.

The winds have waved erratic fronts from lightning's scattered pyres,
the local pub displays the map that marks the line of fires.
They've all joined up to make a ring from Tolmie to Jamieson town,
and waiting for their final move, we bring the cattle down.
They should be mustered up today to snow fed mountain streams,
but sweet green grass and drought relief are this year only dreams.
The mountains that were refuge from their paddocks brown and bare,
are nurturing a firestorm 'neath clouded wreaths of grey despair.

The hoses spread upon the grass, the mops and tubs in line,
are tried and tested once again, to pass the tensing time.
The pumps are checked and plans rehearsed in strained pretending calm,
apologies in advance are made for tomorrow's lack of charm.
A radio plays the ABC, our lifeline through the hours,
it names the spots of greatest risk, and then it mentions ours.
If you believed the papers, Mansfield town is vacant now,
but stubborn people joke, as Johnny Lovick herds his cows.

The media ask, "Why don't you leave?" They jut a defiant jaw,
"We've farmed here a hundred years, 'n' we'll farm a hundred more.
If we lose this place we're finished, there's nothing else we know,"
and the fire is brighter in their eyes than any a bushfire's glow.
Tomorrow may bring a cooling change, and soothe our waiting fears
but the TV predicts a firestorm, the worst in a hundred years.
So tonight we're laughing at the pub, with a spirit you must admire,
we're scared, but wouldn't be anywhere else, than waiting on a fire.

No one slept much here last night, the bark of every dog
and neighing horse and moaning bull, you can't sleep like a log.
The cloying smoke smells wakes you up, your heart is beating fast,
you rise and check for embers, of for spotfires in the grass.
The morning brings the hot north wind, the smoke is whipped away,
we yard the cows and bloody swear, 'cause it's too late to pray.
And finally it's coming; there's a grey-brown plume in sight,
my stomach knots up angrily, like I'm going in to fight.
Uncle Donny pulls his boots on, and snarls, " I hate a bloody fire."
We start the pump, and board the ute, we drive down to the wire.

But now the wind is at our backs, the change has come through fast,
the fire backs off to somewhere else, we breath a sigh at last.
For though it's like a furnace with the dial at forty-one,
we've played at wind change lottery, and today looks like we won.
Tonight my swag is someone's home, someone who didn't win like us,
tomorrow the lottery starts again, but no-one makes a fuss.
The weeks go by, the fires spread, the stakes keep getting higher,
the strike teams back-burn every night, thank God they never tire.

"It's eight weeks and you're back", said Gran. "You ask if we're alright?"
"The fires have stalked this rim of hills, I've seen them every night.
They fought alone in the Howqua hills, with just experience and a mate
we smelt their smoke each morning, but all we could do was wait.
I've sent children up for cattle when the snows have come in fast,
then waited up for their return, when dusk had long since passed.
I drove a dying herd in eighty two, down dreary roads when things were dire
but the longest days I ever knew, were waiting, on a fire."