

## One Clear Call

Holidays, the bush, dusty Coonabarabran  
and out of the blue your friend has rung  
you, caught on the hop; an engineer  
who never looks at a book, whose father's died.

The service is soon; and he wants to read  
something – not scriptural – literature perhaps:  
the skilled academic that you are,  
you suggest – a good choice – “Crossing the Bar”.

“Where can I buy it?” he asks, “and quickly?”  
“I know it,” you say, down the glistening, impersonal wires,  
“I’ll repeat it, slowly”. He waits, still, fingers  
at the ready, for the first poem he’s heard since school.

So you start, inexpressively, enunciating each syllable,  
“Sunset and evening star, / And one clear call for me”,  
into a vast tide of silence at the end of the line,  
the unmoving pen you cannot see, foaming at the words

until his wife picks up the mouthpiece, and the pen,  
and you are Tennyson’s mouthpiece, shaken a little  
and wondering now, as you begin again  
before a face you cannot see: “Sunset and evening star...”

until she is choking too, and her wrist falters  
across the lines, registering the scatter of words  
as they lift from Tennyson’s dead mouth and your own voice  
where they have lain like subject matter of no-one’s choice,

that past sensation of syllables sweeping you and your friends  
across the bar of technique, of grieving, of consolation.