

## Zoo Visits

He polished his car to a shine, he kept  
a 'clean machine' inside and out, but down  
from 'up north', the red dirt would stay  
in the seams of doors, around the fittings.  
A detailing of distance. A truth unto itself.

What to do with us, having travelled  
so far—the access-visit ontology, a divorced  
bloke's existential crisis. Kids aren't going  
to live on feelings alone for an afternoon,  
they want entertainment. Time is action.

The zoo excursion undoes its own irony—  
the cages more than conceits, more than  
allegories of maintenance and child support.  
The babies of most species cling to their  
mothers, and that's got to hurt. The smell

is so prevalent—we called it 'a stink',  
the kind we gave off when badly behaved  
and told off, a fear reaction. We were brave  
leaning in through iron bars thick as Dad's arms,  
knocking at the armour of the rhinoceros,

as wagtails picked insects off. Could it feel  
their delicate feet? Its horn, worn down  
to a stump, looked anything but mythical.  
Rough skin fascinated us—the elephant's,  
the hippopotamus rolling in its baby bath.

The fairy penguins launched from their castle  
into a moat of fast food, and that was a talking  
point. Penguins and coke cans. Magical. Like  
pythons in glass boxes or the smoking gorilla.  
Time is action. And our dad glanced at his

watch out of anticipation. We didn't get that.  
We were too busy making metaphors. The mini  
railway wound its way around the heartlands.  
Safari. The sound of species lost since then.  
Zoological gardens. Family crisis centre.

The polar bear mauled someone who jumped  
into its green waters. It leapt off its white ledges  
bothered by no melt, ate, and covered its bloody  
black nose. It happened before and after Dad  
talked of its power. He liked the bears. And the cats.

He wanted us to like them. The big animals.  
The big dads. Keep away from the edge,  
he said in a way that meant more to us than  
an excursion. Than entertainment. Than time.  
Than the car he polished to a shine, red dirt.