

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.