City Zoo

*Inspired by the flood in Tbilisi, Georgia, June 2015*

Too young, unspoiled, to know no better

than believe it was like stepping

into a storybook, turning a corner as you turned

a page to see a tribe of macaques shin

drainpipes and screech from ledges

at streets laid out for tricks and plunder,

a cartoon hippo grinding fig leaves in a jumble

of café tables and chairs; to wonder with a bear

standing tall before its shop-window reflection,

unbelieving in the size and space of its freedom.

Even as the air stilled when the white tiger showed,

curiosity held him fast for time enough

to follow its slouch through the city

and sense his fingers long to touch

the shadows of bars burned into its fur.

Late memory told another story: water thick as oil

raged through spars and mesh of cages,

branches and bodies colliding,

groups of men shin-deep in mud aimed

rifles and electric prods,

families shied from bloated dregs of bear and wolf

swilled into corners,

clustered faces looked out on piles of monkey

corpses, stared into the fused lightbulb eyes

of a hippo made inanimate by its pink tranquilliser brooch.

And when children asked about the picture

of that boy stroking the matted tiger’s hide,

he tried to explain about the butterfly

that turns from flowers

to feed on rotting flesh.