

Snake Farm

God knows how they got good at this,
the small men in safari suits chasing
long noodles and fish balls with American
cigarettes, plodding like postmen
to terrariums crammed with ficus leaves
limed with fresh scat. They seem to think death
never strikes without reason, by the way they snake
arms through lids and trap doors, dropping
white mice with no great urgency, no
reverence for the small gods turbaned
in the branches, more beautiful than evil
need be — the pit viper, cream-lipped vine
of kiwi green, the banded krait,
a yellow pepper charred by fire, the mangrove,
beetle-black and ringed with false golds —
all command the same indifference, the men
ignore them like the cameras clicking
blindly in their eyes. Even the cobra pit
they stroll through like a hen yard,
disturbing the clay pots where they drowse,
gaffing them out into a gunny sack to spill
before the tourists, sweaty, hungry
for the exotic after days of common poverty,
tantalized by this richness, this king
moving like a runnel off a dirt road
in the rain. And when it slides too close
to their backpedaling feet, the handlers haul it
by the whip end of its tail back until
it rears up, a tension, an imminent
reprisal, head held level above the neck's nearly
sensual undulations. It is the snake that charms,
lulls, what it kills — a trick it falls for,
fixing on a left hand while a right
slaps from behind. And as though there were
doubts about the stakes, as though

to prove some higher purpose, they wedge
a saucer in its grin and press a pearl
of venom out, extending it to the rattled crowd
who see in this slick glycerin only
the promise of a thirsty death and not
the chance to make a small life on bare feet.