Snake-Man

(La Perouse)

Snakes don’t want to — or can’t learn — to love you.
They go to ground, or strike as their wont; whatever the snake-fit thing to do.
So — who’d want to play with them?

This fellow does, apparently: shaking them out of their separate, tied sacks
of hessian sample-bags, each poured tumbling onto the ground,
spilled like soiled washing at his boots —

One hightails it toward the crowd, to create some frisson. (It works.)
The Snake-man just reaches out and turns it neatly back
on his long, metal stick: looped like dangerous molasses on a spoon;
then gives it time out in a stout-lidded Tupperware box.

Using this stick like an inverse lightning-rod
to steer the strike away from him,
he continues to stir the snake-pot: toppling more louts out,
to strut their stuff, by ones and twos; untangling them,
nudging them this way or that.
It’s like trying to herd lethal cats, doing his slow-step skate about them.
Keeping a sly, sideways eye on them,
and cool count of what’s out-and-about,
as he relates their particular temperaments — habitats and range;
toxic effect on the nervous system and brain.

Working them over like holiday snaps,
he entertains us, this diligent showman-conjuror
with the sun’s sweat coiled tight at the small of his back.
Thanking us finally at the end, and with his pale, scarred fingers and hands
passing around his sweat-stained hat.
Which he’s removed like a gentleman-caller’s
in respectful token to these, his tempestuous loves: the snakes.
Who don’t, or won’t — or can’t in fact — love us.