

JENNIFER STILL / Auction Items

The day they pulled his body from the lake we became unafraid of snakes.

The aquarium sat in the rain as his red face narrowed through the sand.

A man in dress pants walked out into the lake, let the waves unroll his cuffs.

There was nothing to hold onto. A canoe anchored to its own abandonment—two ends horned up from a submerged hull, rocking.

When she held up the snake, its body locked a stiff rope. End to end muscle clung to nothing but itself.

The auctioneer was late to the stage. He had been walking vigil through the night, mumbling prayers fast as numbers.

There is a responsibility not to look at the grieving, but to witness the cloud that parts for the twelve gold bars pillaring the lake.

The auctioneer knows what we want to pay for, raises us gently with figures we understand.

It takes twenty-four hours for his body to surface. The family has requested we not know his name.

Everywhere “action” appears where “auction” should be.

The red canoe is the prize item we pretend not to want.

With numbers stuck to our chests.

“A reminder you must register your name before you can bid.”

A wall hangs from the lifejacket’s held breath.

More people than you think do not know how to swim.

That the snake can float its entire body upon the hook of her thumb.

It’s the foreignness of such grasping, such taut air, not the snake, we fear.

The evening lake slips its skin, a sky, blue-grey, at our feet.

“Who will give me five dollars, five dollars for the snake, come on now, five dollars for a forty dollar aquarium and a bonus snake, let’s keep this alive here folks, don’t let me give this away, do I see five, five dollars, ok five, now we’ll take this slow folks, six fifty, do I see six fifty, six fifty folks, six fifty now let’s go seven, ok seven, seven fifty, seven fifty for the snake ladies and gentlemen, don’t let it end here, let’s go eight, ok eight fifty now for a free snake and a forty dollar aquarium. . . .”

There is a moment the auctioneer is abandoned, when the bidders make their deals direct, one on one, above the crowd.

There are no faces, only hands, hands in the air, waving and just like that a bidder clasps his chest and bows out.

He was found ten feet below his boat twenty-four hours later with forty people on the shore. Candles, waxed saucers, and no moon streaked their faces.

The auctioneer didn’t know the grandmother had placed a minimum fifty-dollar bid. So everyone lost and the cold-blooded moved inside.

One man who wanted to swim out in the night feels for him somewhere just below the imagination.

The rain was a blessing that afternoon—no child shrieking or swimming.

A pause came over the bidders when they opened their black umbrellas.

We came for a walk on the beach, forgetting. Stepped over the lines in the sand, the dragged rib of his boat.

No one marks the hours it takes for the wind to shift.

Everything on this edge has gone soft. The beerbottle, the divers.

At some point you must stop and think about what you are willing to carry away.

“Going once, going twice . . .”

This is the moment you get what you came for.

A show of hands tolling the air.