When you come in from running
and tell me you saw a large water moccasin
wrapped around a tree trunk
I keep imagining the worst:
I am on my bike and the snake slithers
across the path in front of me,
swirling and twirling its body.
I have to stop, cotton blowing
in slow motion into my face and neck,
the snake’s cotton mouth wide open
as it lunges toward me
and bites me just above the ankle.
Or, I come upon the snake
as I walk my bike
across the grass to the road,
its head rears up suddenly.
Or, you can’t run past it
fast enough, and it unwraps
itself quickly and drops from the tree,
a wriggling tree root at your feet.
I have to think differently,
more like the archeologist
you told me about who befriends
poisonous snakes at digs,
hanging them from her neck,
letting them sleep in her purse.
It’s ninety degrees and barely windy,
the colors of wildflowers are rushing by me,
lavender, reddish-orange poppies,
the bridal-veil lace of Queen Anne’s lace,
the white-lined tail of a scissortail
slicing air thermals.
Even this venomous snake fits wordlessly
wrapped around a tree trunk.
It might be fearful of all these people
running, walking, riding bikes, rollerblading,
so it tightly hugs the tree,
and it is less frightening than the man
who asks me for a ride,
or the boys who try to make me wince
by almost crashing into me,
or the women who block my way.

Maybe it’s oblivious, even sleeping,
knowing the tree by curving itself
around the tree,
liking the feeling of rough, hot bark
against its belly, its belly
always against something,
against the cool prairie grasses,
sliding through the river water,
moccasin skin touching, feeling, brushing
the earth, the river bottom, the currents
until what is inside the skin
soundlessly slips away.