

One Snake

By Kelly Vande Plasse

When my son texts me a photo of himself
alone in the Pine Ridge Natural Area
in Colorado with a six-foot-long snake draped

over his shoulders and looped several times
around his left arm, I am not alarmed. I know
that he knows the snake is not venomous.

And the snake knows he is not its prey.
He would not so endanger himself or the snake.
I text him back to say, *She is gorgeous! What*

kind is she? She is ochre of prairie sand with drops
of darkest night seeping in - eyes with pupils as
black and round as September-ripe chokecherries.

I say *she*, because among snakes, the females
are the larger of their species. *Bull snake*,
my son replies. I forward the photo on to my

mother, with the caption, *bull snake, non-venomous*.
Is that really just one snake? she wants to know.
Yes, I tell her, *just one snake*. Though perhaps

she makes a point, for the front end of the
snake is more a Harris Island tweed, cream
of pasture-fed cows, with black corona edging

umber suns - the contrast between figure and
ground becoming more distinct only toward
the tail, where the eye arrives at contours of yellow

cone flower, feral black-eyed Susan. She wears
the patterns of growth upon her scales, staggered
rows of keratin, the same substance as human

finger and toenails, and though she appears still
in this photo, in the video, her muscles alternate
contract and relax, so that she glides forward,

a rasping of scales upon scales as she rubs against
her own muscled body and along my son's sun-warmed
skin, drawing in some of his warmth as she goes.

Each moment reveals another of her selves: she has lived
through slender years of youth, years of mouse and prairie
dog in plenty, years of drought – all this chafing against....

against is what propels her forward. What happens after -
my son lays the snake back upon hard ground, the whole
keeled map of her visible in a single glance. Rake

of low afternoon sun. She swivels back into cover
of green needle grass, lanceleaf sage, purple milkvetch.
Ripple of muscle like water touched by wind. Time

tapers toward tail - leaves only a shallow trough to trace.
How long and sinuous this life,
but still only one snake.