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# The Madonna of the Serpent

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*Jennifer Atkinson*

THE MADONNA OF THE SERPENT

Naturally she'd heard the story—  
the woman born of bone and sleep,  
after the pleasure of naming was over,  
into a shady Alhambra of fountains and roses,  
concentric paths from the river-hemmed woods  
to the orchard and winding inward—a set-up—  
toward temptation at its pretty heart.  
She had long considered Eve, unashamed and naked.  
What suspense the Gardener must have felt  
overseeing her aimless walks among  
the lemon trees and apples, the grapes  
wrinkling to raisins on the vine.  
Until at last the device of the articulate  
snake, the invention of fear and shame  
resolves the conflict—will she? won't she?  
—in a crowning envoi of curses, burning  
like sunset through the arabesqued grillwork behind them.

Even so she froze, the serpent coiled  
on a sunny rock—froze still and speechless  
though a good stomp and outcry would have banished it.  
The head, hardly separate from the body,  
the wound-up length, leaden and scaled, sallow  
beneath, slept unaware. She recognized  
the lidded eyes and nostrils, the jawline  
drawn as if with ink. Across  
the floury dust, she saw the snake had left  
its mark inscribed among her own.  
The dreamy eyes slid open—blank,  
unknowing, flat—but the tongue proved quick

like a snake. And the mouth. One glimpse and she knew  
its yawn in an instant that felt, as she named it,  
like anguish, like bodily pity, the nervous sting  
of breast milk letting down in answer  
to a baby's cry. The snake was gone.