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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.