Thinking Woman (California Quarterly)

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THINKING WOMAN

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.
--Adrienne Rich

They were many and I was one.

They’d lumber up the fire escape
but it was no secret thanks to the all-night light
of the adjacent doughnut shop.
Parting the cheap beaded curtain I hung as a joke
to put them at ease, each one
took my breath away as my mouth
opened into the Lascaux caverns,
the breach between my legs
their Mariana’s Trench.

Fire-breath’d, steam-snorters whose claws
ribboned the skin on my back, they loved me
as gently as they could; I knew that.

And they knew for all their variety
I could not compare them to one another;
each was my favorite for a time—
the two-headed candle-eyed Amphisbaena,
Gorgon (who politely wore a bag over her head),
Behemoth and Hydra, desert stalking Basilisk
who replenished the wine glass it drained
with poison, the one-legged bird whose hop
brought rain, uprooted mandrake and Chimera,
the droopy antelope with boarish head
so heavy it could only look down—
I entertained them all and they were kind
to stay the night except for Cereberus
who had to get back to his post
guarding some very important gates.

Temptation can be resisted in the ranks of man.
Not so with these misshapen creatures
who moved in me sowing their mutant
seeds of immortality.