THALIA PANDIRI


“Oh, mija, you’re always looking for tits on snakes and vests on sleeves” a mother chides her daughter, in hard labor with her first baby. “Ah, but the last time you opened your legs you weren’t complaining,” mutters the doctor who “sticks his head between her legs and [...] examines her with the nonchalance of a chef checking the turkey in the oven.” The new mother in the title story doesn’t quite get the message yet, but by the end of the piece when she looks into her newborn’s eyes and “realizes that, at this moment, nothing else matters” we’ve been shown her future. She’ll turn out baby after baby, get no thanks for daily drudgery, get blamed by her husband for letting herself go and forcing him to look for fun elsewhere, and sacrifice a hip to osteoporosis.

If wives have it tough, Blum has sympathy for mistresses too, in “Stalin’s Wife” and “Three Frosted Owls.” Even adulterous husbands get our empathy in “The Avon Lady” which opens with one of Blum’s many memorable sentences: “He’s never seen a naked dwarf, but he’s thought about it a few times since he met her.” Virgins don’t have it easy either. A Mexican proverb goes “If you don’t find a husband, you’ll be left to adorn the saints.” In “To Adorn the Saints,” an aging virgin stands naked in the bell tower of the village church and demands a man. The priest and villagers choose the sexton, who thinks “it would be nice for him to have a female companion of his own species, just for a change.”

The young Mexican writer Liliana Blum published her first collection of short stories, *La maledicción de Eva*, in
2002 when she was twenty-eight. Toshiya Kamei’s translation is a pleasure to read and does justice to Blum’s concise, vivid and elegant prose. What’s amazing about the twenty-eight very short pieces in The Curse of Eve is the range of subjects and voices. In “A Sip of Light” we observe a young woman in an urban café, see through her eyes the rainy street outside and the bickering couple seated nearby. Then we enter her mind and find the terrified, damaged child she still is, sent from her village to the city to live with a childless, well-off aunt and uncle. Raped by her uncle, betrayed by her aunt who refuses to believe her, in the end she’s berated by her own mother as an ingrate who spoils everything. People are never just what they seem: the self-possessed young woman is still the little girl hiding in a closet. The respectable married man in “Cookie Monster” is surprised that his wife can’t see he’s given in to his obsession with little boys, and that life goes on as usual.

Who has never been surprised by how differently others see us from how we see ourselves? “Lazarus” (a short, surreal story) follows a man coming home from the grave, expecting a joyous welcome. He spruces himself up, “picking off a worm that had been playing hide and seek in what was left of his face,” but his mother drops dead from shock when she sees him, his wife is fornicating with “a passion she had never shown him,” even his faithful dog attacks him. Fantasy, but also a parable: aren’t we all prone to miscalculations and disappointments?

Blum also takes a cynically amused look at the politically correct and their semiotics. “A Model Kit” takes us into the mind of a successful artist whose work is a byproduct of his art as a serial killer. This could be a horrific tale, and we do empathize with the victims, but in the end we also have to laugh. A reviewer writes “...his painting was well received by his feminist supporters, who stated that the work was a raw
representation of a modern woman forced to live in a brutal and chauvinistic society[...]

Playing with her readers’ expectations, Blum opens “Periquita Shoes” with a sentence suggesting a sentimental romance: “Adán is quite certain she’s the one.” What we get is an attack on a little girl, and an unexpected twist at the end. “That First Time” gets us ready for a story about sex; it opens with “He felt as if he had made love to a whale—and not just because it was a lot of work.” But we’re wrong. This sad kleptomaniac’s passion is stealing from churches; sex makes him feel “like a giant mango raped by a rubber plant.”

Most of Blum’s stories have comic moments, even if the humor is wry or sardonic. This makes sense: humor requires a sense of proportion, distance but empathy as well. We laugh because we recognize something ridiculous or illogical in ourselves, too. Blum’s characters are all unique, but also like people we know, like us, in their struggle to make it through life on this earth. She doesn’t judge them, and neither do her readers.