

The cover features a detailed illustration of a woman with long, dark hair, her eyes closed in a state of contemplation or prayer. She is holding a green apple with both hands, which are positioned in front of her chest. The background is a deep blue with a subtle, embossed pattern. The title is written in a stylized, pinkish-red font.

THE CURSE  
OF EVE  
AND OTHER STORIES

SHORT STORIES BY  
ILIANA BLUM

TRANSLATED BY  
TOSHIYA KAMEI

4065671

*The Curse of Eve*  
*and other stories*

*Liliana Blum*

*Translated from the Spanish by*  
*Toshiya Kamei*



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– *Toshiya Kamei, 2008*

## Translator's Note

*The Curse of Eve* is a first for both writer and translator – the first full-length short story collection for Liliana Blum, and my first book-length translation. And, at the risk of sounding patronizing, I like to think of Liliana V. Blum as my “discovery.” When I first came across her work three years ago on the *Ficticia* website, her stories may not have seemed the obvious choice for a translator. She was not a member of Mexico City’s literati, and her work had not been widely published. However, I was just starting out as a translator, and I wanted to work with a writer who was also at an early stage of her career.

An award-winning short story writer, Liliana Blum is one of the first Mexican writers of her generation to be translated into English. By her own admission, Blum’s literary taste is *norteamericanizado*, and she counts among her influences such writers as Margaret Atwood, Barbara Gowdy and Bret Easton Ellis. However, unlike many internationally educated Mexican writers, she sets her fiction in her native country, more specifically Durango, her birthplace in arid northern Mexico. A few of her recent stories take place in Tampico, the hot and humid port on the Gulf of Mexico, but Blum returns again and again to Durango, where she spent the “most difficult years” of her life.

As many readers have noted, Blum’s stories often conjure up a foreboding atmosphere, setting the stage for tragic events. Although her fiction contains lighthearted moments, she is drawn, like her literary influences, to the dark side of human nature. Dubbed by a male colleague a “damned feminist,” Blum’s fiction explores the lives of Mexican women from diverse backgrounds. Not surprisingly, many of these stories deal with violence against women, and with the restrictive roles imposed on wives and mothers.

In addition to my own literary taste, the author's gender played a role in my decision to translate her. I consciously choose to translate Latin American women writers, who are still underrepresented in literary magazines and anthologies published in their countries. It has been my privilege to work with Blum and her literary sisters, and I hope to continue giving them a voice in English.

– *Toshiya Kamei, 2008*

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## *A New Faith*

*The fresh morning air frees all objects from their own weight. Peaches, oranges, apples and figs float upwards from the branches of the trees and the mossy ground. As you stand among the fruits, a flock of birds comes to you – owls, with their catlike eyes. Their wings cast a shadow across your mind, taking you to forbidden places. You fly over the vine-draped wall, leaving the garden and your beliefs behind. You find yourself naked, inevitably naked, without your dark habit and without shame. In your mind there is only the murmur of fluttering wings – and a peculiar pleasure. The owls caress you, hiding among your breasts and legs...*

A bell tolls in the distance and the owls fly away clumsily. It's the time of the day when everything begins. You smell your damp fingers and you recognize what's inside: this is *you*. When you were a little girl, they told you there was a soul inside every person. You wonder if you have pieces of your soul smeared between your fingers.

The sisters prepare for the first prayers of the day. In silence, you too get ready in the darkness of the cell. The other nuns are already in the chapel. No one notices you arriving a few minutes late. You kneel down and close your eyes, anonymous among all those women who, like you, wear a habit. They're all chastity and devotion. Do they dream the same things you dream?

A lone owl flies inside you. *Go away*, you murmur to yourself. You try to concentrate, and pray to be strong. It's useless. You think this must be what eternity feels like. Time is a brown snail that climbs an endless mossy wall, halts to eat, then inches forward slowly. The chapel smells of fresh flowers. Your mouth moves mechanically, but you don't pray. The snail stops to rest. You wonder if it will ever reach the end of the wall. The chapel also smells of incense. The snail begins to move again. Incense and sad women, that's what this place smells of. You pretend to sing.

"Sister Paula" – someone taps you on the shoulder – "it's time to go." You look at no one as you head for the exit. The snail falls from the wall, leaving only the sticky trail of its journey. Its shell cracks on the cobbled floor.

\* \* \*

There are no voices during breakfast – only the clinking of bowls as spoons go in search of a little more oatmeal; throats that open and close gulping liquids down; dentures and old age chewing without modesty. Breakfast mustn't be enjoyed, only thanked for. You swallow your food and look at your sisters in Christ. Is this really happiness? Did all of them decide to become nuns of their own free will? You wonder if they know about your past. It's supposed to be a secret – your mother made sure of that. "A good girl from a proper family can't turn out like this. What will people say?" You know it wasn't a question of being able to keep the baby or not: it was a simple problem of appearances. "What will people say?" your mother whined every day. Then the family doctor came

and in silence did his work in you. Your mother's money made him forget. There is always enough money to make people forget anything. Your parents brought you to this convent when you were only fifteen: they told you this was your punishment for loving a man without permission from God or the law. Again and again your mother was guided by what others would say, and you never knew who they were – those *others* who could say the terrible things she was so afraid of.

In the convent no one talks during breakfast. You drink your coffee without sugar.

\* \* \*

The high-ranking nuns think you have a gift with children. For years you have taught in the elementary school managed by the convent. Because you have great patience and the children adore you, your superiors don't think you need a teacher's certificate. You have an advantage over the other sisters who have to stay in the convent to cook and clean all day long. You consider yourself lucky. For you this is an escape, a window to the world, small sweets that brighten your day. But you find yourself imagining what your child would have been like, knowing that you'll never know. And with these thoughts, you're always overcome by the urge to cry. The children in your class try to console you, and you smile bitterly: "It's nothing. It's nothing." It's never nothing.

You examine each one of their drawings. The children had to sketch God as they imagined him. Most drew poor copies of the pictures in their catechism: a good-natured elderly man with sunbeams coming out of his divine head. But you see a drawing that catches your attention: an owl-like creature flying through a gray sky, with tears welling up in its large eyes. The next day you seek out the little artist. "Why is God crying?" you ask the girl, watching your own reflection in her large black eyes. "God cries because he has no friends and he has to be alone," she explains,

with the resignation of an old monk. Then she starts playing nervously with her dark braids. You wait. "You can go now, Alejandrina." You give her drawing an A, of course. The girl goes away, skipping lightly, without stepping on the gray lines between the cobblestones.

\* \* \*

You pause to read the black letters someone scribbled on the tomato you were about to put in your basket: *E tu, che cosa farai quando Dio è morto?* On your knees, you scan the garden to see if someone is watching you, but your eyes find only nuns mechanically picking vegetables. "*E tu, che cosa farai quando Dio è morto,*" you repeat to yourself, wondering who could have written it. The sun draws beads of sweat on your forehead. You need time to think. A cloud darkens the ground. You can feel the coolness of the passing shadow. Is it your flock of owls? It's a special moment, but the sunbeams have returned and you have to let your eyes readjust to the light. You hear dogs barking on the other side of the fence. Or is it a demon howling?

Making sure no one is watching you, you hide the tomato inside your sleeve and return to the convent with the excuse that you don't feel well. And you don't. When you rise to your feet, your step is shaky and your forehead burns. The fresh air in the corridor clears your head a little and you decide to throw away the tomato. It must be just the joke of some mischievous boy who escaped to play in the garden during the break. You tell the Mother Superior about your condition. Maternal, she feels your warm forehead and advises you to rest. "You have permission to miss the afternoon prayers," she says. When you arrive in your cell, you put the tomato on the bare nightstand, close your eyes, and give way to exhaustion. *And you, what will you do when God is dead?*

*Death is gentle, bald, and rides a silver-colored horse. Each time she reaches at her destination, she dismounts from her horse and walks barefoot. Her long feet are covered with calluses, her coarse hands with warts. Always exhausted, always working. Her vulva is dry and dusty. Death is a refined lady with good manners. She dances naked, phantom breasts, under the sun. She acts as if she were the star of a circus that never ends. The lizards give her a big round of applause. Death goes through the audience with a feather hat, smiles with her pearly teeth, teeth of eternal marble. Death confesses she often gets bored with her job.*

And in your dream you want to beg Death to take you with her. But she's gone.

Each time you crawl into bed, you long desperately, futilely, for your rapist. For a moment you tremble with emotion as you feel a hand, but it's Sister Catalina, who, obligingly, wipes your damp forehead. Other nuns gather around your bed and pray for you. Can you feel their prayers? Can they cure you of this sickness? Your eyes remain shut, the sweat trickles down between your breasts, but the nuns only daub your face. You don't notice, but Sister Catalina finds the tomato and takes it to the Mother Superior, along with your student's drawing of God, which you had hanging above your head. The sister crosses herself and leaves your cell in silence. The others follow her. A flock of owls returns to take you. And now it's true; the demons howl behind the walls of the convent.

*The world was in darkness. The moon fell from the sky that day, and, without feet, she walked on a path of many colors. She had fallen from a height, but she never sprouted wings from her cratered shoulder blades. The moon began to walk the earth eternally. The dogs went mad. The elves stopped playing with the oranges in the tree. The tips of their ears pointed toward the moon. And they knew exactly what to do. Fugit irreparabile tempus...*

For an hour you have been awake and have looked in vain for the tomato. A novitiate comes shyly into your cell and hands you a message. She leaves without looking you in the eye. You get dressed and in no time you find yourself knocking on the door of the Mother Superior's office. She is seated behind her large desk. She looks at you sternly, and, without a word, orders you to sit down. The room smells of pinewood and old portraits. The Mother Superior talks to you for a long time: the tomato, the drawing, the ever-existing doubts about your vocation, the devil's work in you, the punishments that befit you.

"Sister Paula, you can't continue teaching the children. You're a bad influence on them. From now on, as a punishment, your job will be cleaning Father Girasol's rooms." She keeps on talking, but you no longer listen. You bow humbly, as if you were truly contrite. But you can only think of your new duties. You feel like someone has opened an umbrella inside your stomach.

Hours later you inform Father Girasol that you'll be in charge of cleaning his small apartment. You try not to stare too intently at his hair, dark as eggplant, at his pear-shaped eyes and walnut-colored skin. You stop yourself before you imagine his figure under the dark forbidden cassock. "Then you must be the girl with the tomato," he jokes. You blush pink and dare to ask him how he knows it. "I know many things," he answers, smiling. He hands you the keys and tells you to clean when he's out. "I understand," you nod, obedient and wicked. You wonder if Father Girasol has noticed that your body is all smiles under your habit.

*You turn the light off and the sun flares up automatically. The flock of owls stops flying and perches on a post, one owl on top of another like a feathered totem pole that watches you. A whole field of sunflowers turns their petalled heads toward you. You pour yourself a glass of milk to eat the breadcrumbs you have left on Father Girasol's brown body.*

You're awake for a couple hours before the morning prayers. You leave your cell on tiptoe and go to the room upstairs, where the pigeons take refuge among the junk. Ignoring the stench that pierces your nose, and making your way through the feathers floating in the air, you arrive at the small wooden window with broken panes. In front of the convent the faint light of a streetlamp protects the pigeons and moths from the complete darkness. You watch a cat as it scurries across the street without looking and without any destination, a game of Russian roulette, a game of life.

At dawn the dogs start barking in the distance. Insomnia.

\* \* \*

You have longed for this moment all day. Slowly, you open the door with the key he gave you. The fresh air from the lime wall caresses your skin. You feel as if you were in another world, far from the heat, the sisters, and everything else. The room smells of citrus fruit and the wet dirt of the plants Father Girasol surely watered before he left. You look around. It feels as if time has stopped. There are books everywhere and you can't stop smiling. Reading secular books is strictly forbidden in the convent and you have a great collection of them before you. There are books on the kitchen table, dishes waiting for the soap and scrubber, more books and clothes on the carpet, books everywhere, on the wicker chairs and on his desk. Books between the green sheets of his bed. You pick one up from the floor. The books are scattered as if they were breadcrumbs. Are you a Gretel who has to follow this path of books? Will you find a Hansel when you reach the end? *Of Love and Other Demons*. You didn't know García Márquez wrote this book. Then you realize you have been in the convent for a long time. But what does it matter anyway when you will spend the rest of your life locked up inside? Bitterly you leaf through the book.

With your eyes shut you imagine Father Girasol reading a few pages of this book and putting it down to pick up a different book. Is this what he does when he's not in the chapel? You imagine him lying on the sofa or rolling on the rug. You try to trace his movements, going from book to book, breathing in the fragrance of the pages. You try to identify a smell. You daydream about his aroma. You imagine his hair smells like mint, he has the scent of chocolate in his mouth, of tobacco on his hands, and his skin smells like oranges. You begin to read until your flock of owls comes for you.

*You make love to him until you are both left drained. The sound of wings is always present. His skin is burning and though you have licked every inch of his body, even his eyes, he's still scorching. You fan him with huge lettuce leaves and dance for him. The moon has finally stopped walking. One of the lizards does a triple back somersault. You feel a small jolt of happiness surging from your dark, salty triangle and embedding itself in each vertebra.*

You open your eyes very slowly, basking in the afterglow of orgasm. You'll feel different early tomorrow. For the moment, you hurry and clean the apartment. You feel so tired, as if you had made love to the writers of all the books you picked up and put on the bookshelf.

By the time you finish cleaning the sun has slipped away.

\* \* \*

At night Mass, only your body fills a place in the third pew on the left. Your imagination runs free and you're afraid Father Girasol will notice that you hide under his black cassock, that you're building a new church, a new faith that stands on those two splendid pillars of muscle.



But the Mass ends and you have to go back to your chores. It's raining – everything is wet.

It's also raining outside in the garden.

\* \* \*

As you expected, Father Girasol doesn't bat an eye at your confession. Because he knows he's so beautiful? You begin to suspect you're not the first one to confess her desire for the Father. He whispers the prayers of the rite of confession and you're forgiven immediately. "Forgiven for everything?" you ask. "Yes, Sister Paula. For everything." Then he tells you what your penance will be, but you don't listen. You don't want to be forgiven. You breathe intensely on the dark confessional curtain. You were right: Father Girasol smells like oranges. You kiss the air and leave.

\* \* \*

The moon has walked thousands of miles since you first made love to Father Girasol's books and his image. The owls have shed their feathers many times since that day when you found him on his knees, writing quotes in different languages on cabbages, tomatoes, and squashes.

Now you find yourself each morning picking vegetables coded with messages he leaves for you. During Mass, the hours for meditation, and the meals, you close your eyes and pretend to pray while pulling the wings off small cupids. Then you go to that place – so secret and so obvious.

You haven't seen Death and her lizards since then. *And you, what will you do when God is dead?*