Latter Days of Eve
by Beverly Burch

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Interview by Michael Nelson

Question: Latter Days of Eve resists reduction. The poems range deftly through time, religious mythology, quirky-but-apt geographical references, and multiple views of violence, balanced and expanded by unexpected expressions of gentleness. From a panoramic vantage point a living wisdom emerges from a restless seeking. Eve explores and tells her own story by dislodging dogma and its sources. She roams from the Danakil, one of the most inhospitable places on the earth, to the boreal forest, later dreaming of the Baha, finding refuge in the Balkans and recalling where the doghobble grows. Does this mapping sketch a strategy for psychological health? A way to seek truth without being shackled by it?

Answer: Eve arises everywhere. Her one story becomes that of others and she/they seek to understand what was denied them in the Garden, i.e., knowledge, including knowledge that she has always been Adam’s equal. And to understand religion—do we or do we not need God? What is our place in the natural world? With others? How do we bear this world?

Q: In your poems Eve appears in many incarnations. Her story twines with that of Adam, Lilith, a woman in a hijab conducting Dvořák in her car, the comic snake that keeps her cynical, the stream of refugees, all depicted in ways that make them feel like our own stories. The fruit of knowledge remains out of reach while somehow keeping it near. She finds liberation in darkness and in the collaborative company of woman. Nothing’s idealized. Did growing up in the south in a strong Christian tradition compel you to investigate Eve from so many angles?

A: Yes, yes, all of the above. The Christian tradition is inescapable, whether lived in or denied. It maintains its weight around us, doesn’t it? The Bible as Canon struck me as a template for Eve’s history to subvert. Ironically, I learned social justice from Biblical teachings. Poverty, imprisonment, greed, hatred—Jesus asked people to attend to these social evils. Historical Christianity has followed this teaching poorly. The tension inside religion torments Eve as it does many. Neither Adam nor his God recognize her so she exists in ways unknown as yet to her. Lilith, the snake, children, strangers—they do recognize her and expand her reality. They are her and also not her.

Q: It doesn’t seem like anger does the work, but more like the deep impulse of needing to be a witness. Not as a by-stander, but someone doing the work of justice. Are you making a case for matriarchy as a corrective to war, violence against those who are most defenseless?

A: Not really. I’m not a fan of any “–archy”. But ties between women are a refuge against patriarchy. Women seem less inclined toward violence but not free of those impulses. The encampments of women in Eve’s story suggest antidotes to patriarchy’s destructiveness but they exist in the imaginary. Or who knows what’s ahead as dystopia deepens into climate chaos? Would these women kill? The question is unanswered. The story could have gone there, an edgy turn some would have welcomed, but that’s not my turn.

Q: The Lilith wind blows refreshingly through these poems and gives Eve the strength she needs to abandon roles that confine her. While she often is known to inhabit darkness how did you bring her so clearly into the light?

A: Lilith is Eve’s double, as she whispers to her. Eve has difficulty seeing herself and also wants to be free of naïve belief or “innocence.” Rooted in the natural world, Lilith...
speaks through myth and Psalm. She moves between darkness and light with some ease. Eve is frightened, unsure, feels ignorant. Not Lilith.

Q: Eve, always on the move, shows how all things are in flux. The tension of opposites—sleep, sleeplessness, good and bad, formal and informal language, closure, lack of closure gives tight structure to the poems. It also hints at a theology of maybe—the possibilities of doing this or that and both. As you wrote, Nothing to tell us how far we are from home, avoids any complacent sense of being safe in the world. How did Eve, who becomes a fierce truth teller, the mother of all, become an inspiration for this book?

A: Thank you for that apt reading of the book. I think of her also as a fierce seeker. Why wouldn’t such a being be tempted by a snake? And tempted by a mysterious world. I don’t know how she became inspiration. She lurks in the mythology of women. In the Abrahamic traditions women have to embrace, deny or revision her. She is named as the source of sin, mother of all, seducer, gullible and submissive mate, tormented creature. For me she just emerged on the page and offered poems.

Q: Exodus, the need to escape, the need to find a way over the next eternal hill, the act of disappearing, gives narrative force to the poems, a real feeling of how impossible it is to nail anything down, and keep it there. Moving into the invisible releases the imagination to see what’s possible and inhabit the horrific. While facts may anchor us in history, the imagination can liberate us from the prison of reality as we have been told to understand it. As you wrote your version of history were you encouraging readers to develop their own? If so, is this a kind of theology?

A: Eve’s history is a loose reading, open to revision. Interesting to think of our private narratives as a kind of theology. I guess they are. First we need to discover what they are, unaware of them as we often are. Then to know they are susceptible to revision and let them develop.

Q: What would you like your book to accomplish? How did your vision of what you wanted to do as you worked on the book for many years evolve and change? How did you know what to include and what to leave behind?

A: I’m unsure what literature accomplishes. Writers struggle with that question except for those who don’t care too much. Choices spring unconsciously and often we’re surprised. What to include is an evolving process, trying to see what the embedded vision is. I think one is always there, obscure as it may be. Poetry wants to engage the conscious mind as it speaks from the unconscious. You can’t be in too much control. Maybe it changes us on that level. Maybe that’s how it keeps asserting our humanity.

Q: While the overt tone of the book is dystopic, the more I delve into your creation, I wonder if compassion doesn’t ultimately come from the catastrophic. The constant bombardment of calamity can make the world claustrophobic, but in the end a spaciousness emanates that Eve, the mother of all, invokes. The sense that there is mercy at work in this world where children are shot in schools is finely choreographed in Cain’s Last Sacrament. Was one of your goals to get us to pay attention to all the horrific things that happen without collapsing into paralysis? To offer a glimmer of hope in times of darkness?

A: That’s what I was seeking for myself. Even in dark times like the present there’s light. I need to seek it out. I am subject to despair. As someone has said (who?), hope is not optimism. Compassion needs constant effort in my experience.

Q: Did you enjoy giving the snake a starring role in your book?

A: I love the snake and want the snake to befriend me, so I give the snake attention. Thanks for these brilliant questions.

Beverly Burch