Angel and Animales

Paula Streeter

The mountains of La Tigre in Honduras keep secrets, echo clues, of the woman in black who has for centuries walked the path along the river lamenting her children whom she has drowned. Of packs of dogs, silent, sadistic, that attack and then disappear, just like the vanished one, Jose Angel. Little children, at dawn, waiting at the molina to grind corn for the day’s tortillas, tell of Angel, who was a bad child, raised by the mountain witch with a pack of other bad, dog children. They speak of how one day the forest captured him; the mountain ate him and the river carried away the waste. At age eleven, Jose Angel disappeared and no one tried to find him.

At the reservoir, where the women gather in the morning and again later to collect the day’s water for consumption, they, too, speak of Jose Angel . . . a n g e l . . . could only be the bad one the priest talks about. Lucifer. The oldest bastard son of a prostitute, he was never any good; neither were the others, twelve siblings or cousins, hard to tell, all with different fathers. The grandmother, also bad, left with all those unsolicited bodies to feed and teach her dirty ways. She wasn’t bad; she was the worst of all. No
wonder the daughters left the mountain and went to San Pedro Sula to sell themselves to the gringo soldiers, all the same, filthy, dirty bitches.

Jose, they say, had returned to the village once as a man, when his mother was planted in the ground, dead from SEDA—as people call AIDS—and a second time when his half sister, half-black, followed her mother down the same path, buried in the putrefied womb of the mountain. Jose, they say, was tall and strong, and it couldn't have been anyone else because that kind of meanness was singular to the only man in this world, with those gringo-gray eyes speckled with the grit of the mountain. Strange, they say, he had a golden smile, nice clothes and shoes, store bought. Certainly then, without doubt, he is an outlaw, probably a drugga or robber or kidnapper.

No, he is much worse. A cousin has a friend who knows someone who heard from someone in Tegucigalpa, that Jose had, in a rage, killed a man who looked at him and beat up three others all the same. God won the battle, didn't let him kill them all; he has been in prison, they say, for a long time now, caged, as that kind of dog deserves.

She first sees the effects of Jose Angel, as a myth, while pulling a large brass screen through mashed esote fibers, making paper by hand in San Juancito. She and most of the women in the remote village spend every day but Sunday at the shop, elbow deep in slurry, singing and telling stories, while others couch wet sheets of paper onto fabric for blotting and drying. Since the only clock in town is a sometimes-slow, sometimes-fast, often-times-dead, foreign, battery-operated eye on the wall, the women come to work when they get here. The ancient-looking Petronilla arrives with her two youngest children in tow. This day she comes with news, big news. She had taken the bus to Valle on Sunday, and on her return trip she listened to a group of men talking—Jose Angel was out of jail and coming back to the mountain after nearly a quarter of a century.
Smiles melt off the women’s faces forming a collective puddle. This is bad. What to do? The old man in the village, Don Muncho, and his scruffy miniature poodle-like dog, Chimaco, have assumed the position of guardians of the working women, posting themselves on a bench outside the studio. An ideal spot. Not only is Don Muncho fed everyday beans, rice and tortillas served on a banana leaf, he is also privy to every bit of gossip in town. All the women, reacting to Petro’s news go through the massive colonial swinging doors as if one and expand to surround the old man with the cries of, “Is Jose Angel back?”

With his sly, old, toothless grin, he says, as if the mountain had shared with him all its secrets, “Don’t know, si, could be.”

Soon distracted by work, the tension of the news subsides as they get involved with filling orders: forty-eight cards and envelopes dyed blue with wild indigo for the Japanese embassy and as many gift bags as can be made for En Vitro, an upscale store in Tegucigalpa; the proprietor is Regina Fuentes, one of the owners of the paper company. Not until they are nearly done for the day do the women begin to turn their attentions back to the possibility of evil returning.

“Gringa, you must stay at my house tonight,” says Maria Gadoye, who already houses seventeen in a two-room shanty. The gringa, an investor in the paper-making operation from up North, feels their concern.

“No, Gringa, come with me; it isn’t safe at yours.”

“You’re worth money; it isn’t good for you to be alone.”

As a choir of invitations continues, she thinks it is true. One of the most profitable emerging professions in Honduras is kidnapping, and people of means need protection; but she is not really a person of means, and protection for her, as the women always say, comes in the form of several dozen children. They materialize the moment she leaves the factory every day and stay with her
until exhaustion ends her attentions. It would be crazy to challenge the “animals,” as she lovingly calls them, and Don Muncho’s reaction wasn’t one of alarm. “No thank you, ladies. It will be all right,” she says.

When they leave the studio, as usual the children come out of crevasses in the granite mountain, grabbing for the privilege to carry her bundle of imperfect paper home. Eugenio, an angry eight-year-old little man who had been there to help lead her to town on her first visit, doesn’t care about the package, but always fights his way to hold her hand. It seems he is always fighting something, including the need to fight. His home is located within view of her house, a short distance up the mountain path, a rusted, corrugated steel box with windows that don’t close, clinging to the vertical landscape. Within it, his drug-addicted mother manages to survive with the man of the moment and three older brothers who are often seen wandering around town with halos of vibrant spray-paint colors, like targets, around their nostrils.

Her own house is in complete contrast, a refuge from beatings and boredom. Adobe, two rooms solidly set, the mountain granite makes the floor and two walls. She has books with colorful pictures and strange symbols, paint and crayon and, of course, the day’s rejected paper that offers the children a place of their own to create art. Above all they come for the puppet theater made from materials salvaged from the skeletal remains of deteriorated buildings. The children compose stories and practice lines until the dialogue is refined and committed to memory; they practice voices and sounds and laughing. Forms torn or cut out of paper are colored and decorated with leaves and feathers and brought to life on little crosses made from sticks. On worn-out bed sheets from the United States, they paint backdrops, lands with blood-red oceans, bruised purple land, footprints emerging from the water, traversing the golden skies.
There are rules at her house, the only place in town with expectations from “little animals.” If they need to relieve themselves, they must use the shovel, go behind the wall in back of the house and dig a hole. There is to be nothing left above ground to smell or bring bugs or dogs. They must share books and toys and take turns. Absolutely no fighting, or everyone has to leave until further notice. There are hushed cutting words and severing looks but rarely do things escalate to hitting. When it does, Eugenio is usually blamed twice: once for starting the conflict and then for being the cause of the escalation and eviction. The other children have houses to go to where mothers struggle to feed them, mend their threadbare clothes and recognize their own children.

Eugenio is without a doubt her favorite, but she doesn’t know what happens when she isn’t around. Doesn’t understand what happens here. Once, after giving him food to take to his family, she woke with the sun and roosters to find him bruised and bloodied, sleeping on her door sill. He didn’t cry and wouldn’t say a word.

He also remained quiet when the women of the factory complained if he came to work with her. He is filthy and should be in school or at work. Their children, in part because of paper, can now attend school. They can purchase shoes, a white shirt, a blue skirt or pants, books and pencils; and they can make their own paper, everything required. She and Regina had bought these things for Eugenio, as well as food for the family, so he wouldn’t have to go to work in the fields with the men. The next day he was in the same old filthy clothes, fibers held together with dirt, fighting off dogs, going through her compost for moldy rice.

Five days since the news of impending chaos at Jose Angel’s arrival in the village, nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Nothing until, the last one to leave work, she goes out to lock the door and head home. Only a dozen, more or less, children materialize, the youngest except for
Eugenio, who is particularly animated, pointing up at the sky, chattering and laughing. Most of the little animales run ahead, waving back to hurry, not giving a care about the bundle she carries. The vertical incline is a challenge when approached on her terms but particularly difficult when being practically dragged by children. As they reach a shelf on the road, a spot that reveals the shape of the globe, the cause of the excitement becomes known. The older children are atop a boulder the size of the Pantheon. In the center is a man wearing a bandana around his face, like a bandit from an old black-and-white western, feet planted, knees bent, arms wrapping around his shins, flying a kite. A solitary figure can often be seen perched over the valley like a sentinel of the ancients, but this man is atypical, not barrel but broad-chested, and he appears tall, even if squatting. When the explorers navigating the heavens spot her, they squeal with exhilaration, envelop the man, and he disappears.

In moments when the children converge on her house, they explain how they helped the man to fly. After school, while they were waiting, they saw him on the lookout. When they went to see who and what and why, they found the man unraveling torn burlap bags used for hauling cane. He was taking the threads one at a time and tying them together and rolling them into a ball. He had sticks from the forest, tree-sap glue and something rare—bags made of plastic—and the children all helped; every one of them contributed to making the kite that soared with angels. His name was Jose, and he is very nice.

The next morning the women are slow to arrive; they trickle in distracted and agitated. To the children, Jose Angel is forever a bad child, but the women at the paper factory have fears to manifest. No one is safe now. He will give the children drugs and steal what little they have. It is a trick to be nice to the children. There is no limit to the deceit of Jose Angel. After several weeks of glimpses of the
vanishing man on the mountain, the tension shows in the absence of chatter. While everyone is engaged with a job, couching a batch of paper, beating the fibers, filling vats with water, Chimaco’s barking breaks the silence that had muted the village.

Don Muncho can be heard shouting a short distance from the door. She and the ladies go outside at the instant a machete decapitates the small white dog. His body remains standing, blood rhythmically spurting out, while the head drops in place: The dog’s teeth are still bared and eyes wide open, trying to defend as blood pools in the gravel, and the steel blade lays beside him as if its final conquest. Don Muncho steps back in trepidation and disbelief, his baggy canvas pants taking on a bold red pattern with each remaining beat of his companion’s heart. The women are screaming for him to come to the studio; they can drop the two-by-six into the bracket and barricade the doors.

He just stands there.

As three men drunk on cane alcohol or crazed on drugs or just wild with rage stand off against the lone eighty-year-old man, Jose, the man with the bandana over his mouth, appears from the river basin. The women, collected together like frightened chicks, scream “Muncho, RUN, you’re surrounded.” Stopping time, the tall lean figure walks past the cluster of women, the old man, the dog still in spasms, and confronts the manic laughter. While the three stagger and grab each other, Jose speaks, hushed but obviously potent, with those eyes, hard above the bandana. He reduces the trio to a slow submissive retreat. He then turns and picks up the head and then the body of Chimaco, still dripping blood, and silently walks away beside Don Muncho.

In that moment, before their eyes, a legend dies and a man is born. The women look at each other as if they, themselves, and history are sources of betrayal, then still like a flock of hens, run into the studio and get several
buckets. Petro cleans off the machete, practical; Don Mucho can use this. With detachment, they clean up the site, as if scraping up pomegranate seed and dumping the waste in the river where red thunderheads dissipate into the open sewer.

No one openly acknowledges a change in attitude. They just don't mention the changes: not when huge bundles of much-needed plant fibers simply materialize each morning outside the studio door, or when an earthen dam for the lagoon used to break down fibers becomes magically reinforced, or when the children report how this man has taught them how to fish and get honey out of the mountain crags without stings.

Jose enters her life more like a stray dog, as much in search of affection as food. He silently stands in the perimeter outside her house while the children play tag with each other. He gradually becomes bold enough to talk to the children in her presence. From behind the cloth that covers half his face, he eventually laughs with them all. Eugenio and the animales make puppets; a large head with flowing auburn hair mounted atop the silhouette of a stiletto-heeled shoe can only be Regina; a blond-haired head with startling red complexion on pumps obviously her. The children could never get used to the fact that she changed color so in the sun. Eugenio, a marvelous mime, has partnered with Jose to depict a time when Dutch strangers who spoke like they were coughing came to town. The two women had made themselves look equally strange to meet with those guests. The play begins with dialogue in broken English, and the children roar at her obvious shock. Where had these words come from? She hadn't taught them. For the rest of the village, much of the mystery of Jose had subsided with the fear, but for her the intrigue is progressively growing.

This is the time of year when there is much to be done. The rainy season approaches, when the air itself weeps constantly, rocks sweat, laundered clothes mold before they
dry and the paper soaks up the sky. Enough paper has to be made ahead and stored to keep the business going, making generic stationary, books and picture frames until the weeping stops again. So they keep every drying rack filled all the time. Jose and the children create games of collecting fibers, and after work they all come to her home. In time, Jose stays after the children go home for the night. They share their burdens, and he sheds his mask, revealing a handsome, yet terribly scarred man.

It was true. He did kill a man and was in prison a long time. As a child, he washed dishes in a restaurant in the city of walls and slums. She, herself, had visited this city, Tegucigalpa, with its huge statue of Jesus at the top of a mountain, where at night it seemed to be standing on a lighted Coca-Cola sign, giving off a reddish glow. This is where the child survived, eating scraps from the patron’s plates and living in the entrance to the church at the center of the city, while the Coca-Cola Jesus looked down on everyone. He and other children who lived there sometimes played under the statue of a famous fighter, but they were careful not to draw attention. The most innocent fun could bring trouble.

When Jose got older, the owner of the restaurant let him bus tables and soon he waited on rich people. He learned to speak some Dutch, Portuguese, Italian and Arabic but mostly English, and he made money. He used his riches to buy gold to fix teeth rotted in his head from continuous chewing of cane and neglect. His smile was golden and he had a girl, and they had a son. And he had no choice. The men jumped him, were beating him, were trying to steal his teeth, his future, and they did take his future. He had no choice. They broke him, and what they didn’t break and take, the legal system took and failed him. The mother of his son left him and took the child and judged him.

Now, as he sits on the edge of her cinderblock bed, the candlelight reveals jagged scars around his mouth and chin.
When she asks, “What made you leave San Juancito when you were so young?” he replies with silence.

It is deeply quiet and deathly black except for the islets of firelight dispersed across the facades of the mountains. A sharp trutrutrutrutrutrutrutrutru . . . papapapapapapapapa cuts, assaulting sources of light. Puffs of adobe are left hanging in the air, while objects ricochet off the stone walls. As if choreographed and rehearsed multiple times, Jose grabs her and pushes her out the back door, face down in the very earth that serves as her toilet. The automatic gunfire continues over the sounds of frenzied laughter until dead peace. She and Jose stay motionless, listening for indications of a future, and there is nothing. In an atypical display of force, he more than instructs her to stay where she is until he returns. She will forever remember the crunching of gravel, like whispers of a ticking clock as he moves away. Waiting. She lay as if an object, in complete void until the gunfire begins again, intermittently, somewhere up the valley.

When Jose returns much later, he reports that he has checked every home in the Abajo and Centro, and no one is hurt. He can’t know for sure; how can he know? She finds comfort in the dirt and the silence until he finally coaxes her to bed.

She is exhausted after a sleepless night, when the women from farther out come to the studio with their stories of survival. Once it is apparent that life as they know it continues, the conversation turns to holiday plans and preparations. San Juancito has a two-day Christmas festival with music and dancing beginning Christmas Eve. Square-dance type dresses with layers of ruffles, some passed down for generations, need to be freshened because husbands will be coming home. There is so much to be done; trim the central plaza with tin-can garlands and folded paper birds, adorn the city and part of the mountain with stone luminaries, make cake out of real white flour...
and concoct an eggnog-type beverage, using homemade cane alcohol to be consumed by all, leaving Christmas Day a festival of the hangover for young and old alike.

Regina asks her to celebrate with her family in Tegucigalpa and then travel to an active volcano in Guatemala for an annual New Year’s Eve retreat with friends. From there, Regina will go to Japan to work for several months at an art-glass foundry. This sounds good but so does staying at home or gathering with friends who are associated with NGOs in the nearby town of Cantarranas, or joining the rather mysterious George and Ester, the young couple who moved to Honduras from Germany specifically to live on top of the mountain in El Rosario.

The children and Jose are obviously disappointed when she tells them she will be at the Christmas Day festival but as for the eve before, she is going to hike up to the German’s home above the clouds that cloak San Juancito. As diversion, she has the animales choose one of their new books to practice reading while she packs chayote, avocados, handmade books and stationary for hostess gifts as well as for whoever else may join the celebration. The children choose Red Riding Hood, and Eugenio acts out every character, masterfully changing posture and expressions until one of the older boys decides he is a much better wolf and a fight ensues. Party’s over.

Not far up the path, the moisture that envelops every molecule begins. The higher she goes, the more rainlike it becomes and cooler. The path becomes slick, but she knows the way, has taken it many times with the children gathering fruit. A little rain will not dampen her day of vacation, and with perhaps forty minutes left in the hike, time alone is truly a holiday gift.

At the house on the top of the mountain, George and Ester greet her with a glass of wine, another gift, something she hadn’t enjoyed for months. Their house is warm and
filled with smells reminiscent of the States, meat cooking with herbs, real bread and cheese. There is even a Christmas tree decorated with fruit and cookies. If not for the clouds below, it would be possible to see the line of lights that define the coastline; above, the stars are beginning to distinguish themselves from the dusk. Aside from the hosts, there are two Dutch botanists working on the reforestation of La Tigre Cloud Forest, a Brazilian banker who easily loses his business self, two Americans who somehow found this place and are struggling to find their vacation in the presence of poverty, and the almost legendary Rene Viale, a sixty-something French doctor researching traditional Mayan medicines, accompanied by his twenty-year-old Honduran girlfriend. All this conversation and a table set with plates, silverware, linens, water glasses and wine goblets, after so many months of beans and rice served with fingers, this evening is a complete package.

Still sipping wine, while exchanging gifts and cleaning up, she has tinges of longing to be back in the village—to see the women all decked out and watch the children celebrate with their families, but mostly to be with Jose. “Thank you so much, this has been a delightful Christmas Eve. I’m so grateful to have been included.”

“You aren’t going? Everyone else is staying until the day after Christmas. We have plenty of beds and food; you mustn’t go,” says Ester.

Perhaps it is the wine talking. “I really think it is a good idea to get home, you know; there is nothing like sleeping on your own slab.”

Looking out the window, at the eerily glowing blanket covering the lower elevations, someone says, “It’s a long walk and it might be raining hard along the way. We would love to have you stay, maybe play some cards.”

“Really, I have had a wonderful time and appreciate your hospitality but would like to wake up in San Juancito. Start the day off there.”
“Sure, got ya that,” says George. “Here’s a head lamp, and if you follow the path below the house instead of the one you came on, you’ll save maybe twenty minutes. Some spots are a bit steeper, but for the most part it is about the same. You’ll come to the village alongside the river to the west, not from the north. The path is pretty clear, the one I use.”

She steps out into the snap of fresh air and is surprised to hear the music and smell the bonfire from below. Probably not so much clouds as smoke down there. The mountain must be empty, everyone from vertical miles around must be in the village square making merry. Intoxicated with the evening, she turns on the head lamp and without much consideration takes off on George’s suggested route. The walk feels wonderful after too much food and drink. She goes back in her mind to the conversations of projects and plans by such enlightened people, the play of world events continues on without her on stage or even in the audience; she doesn’t miss any of that. If anything, she misses books and speaking English, or rather knowing for sure the meaning of words in context, but all and all, she loves her home in the village and can see her future here.

Lost in contentment, a sharp blow from behind propels her to fall precipitously forward hitting rocks and plants on the way down, where she lands face down on a muddy gravel flat. As she tries to gain her bearings, she realizes the two jars of George’s homemade jam are painfully shattered beneath her in her pockets. An intense pressure is exerted on her back. Then the sound of a drunken dog-like growl, speaking Spanish. She tries to stand . . . can’t . . . forces her head to turn. A fire with men silhouetted . . . staggering toward her . . . face is shoved in the sludge . . . mouth and nose full of muck . . . severe blows to being . . . bones snapping . . . pain so intense . . .
can't help herself . . . nostrils of sludge . . . urinates . . . has to move or drown in the mountain . . . has to swallow the mire to hope to breathe . . . clothes wrenched off . . . zipper rips . . . pressure everywhere . . . smell of feces and smoke and vomit . . . forced to face the fire . . . flash of machete . . . the flat steel transforms into a dry ice thread across the back of her neck . . . surrender.

The water is cold.
The angel is with her. His scars are worse when he doesn't smile. He's using his bandana to wipe blood from her body. It has been badly beaten. Great plumes of red are pulled with the current. When has she seen that before?

She is not Chimaco. She did not surrender.

Jose lifts her from the water. He blots the flesh dry, blood immediately returning to the surface. He wraps her in a blanket and with great strength helps her to his childhood home on the mountain. She has never been here before. He covers open wounds with leaves and salves and prepares unfamiliar foods. He is mostly silent. He is not sure he knows her, but she is sure he does.

He works deliberately.

Every morning he sits on the edge of the bed and begins to know.

He is attentive and never goes far.

He rarely smiles but when he does, his scars disappear for that moment. Now he knows her.

On this morning, as he pets her head, tears settle in his eyes. He speaks. Once upon a time, when he was eleven years old, he followed some men to San Juancito Arriba. He was going to go to work with them, to make money to help his grandmother and his sisters and brothers. The men lied. There was no work. The men started drinking; they were *loco*, taunted him, pushed him down, kicked him, laughed as a mongrel dog left its seed on his back side, and he made himself disappear once a long time ago.

Eugenio and the other children come to the hut everyday only to be turned away. Finally through persistence and
annoyance, Eugenio is allowed in. For the brief moment he looks into her eyes, she sees horror and is finally aware. “The women,” he says looking at the ground, “want to bring food, and children wonder what happened. When are you coming home?”

Jose knows what a difficult thing it is to go home.

Letters from San Juancito arrive in the United States. April 3 from Regina, Dearest, I was so shocked when I returned home. Why ever did you leave? No one will tell me anything.

August 1 from Regina, Dearest, Everyone is wondering when you are coming back, they miss you terribly, especially Eugenio and Jose Angel of all people. What happened between you two? . . . I have some very sad news, I’m so sorry to tell you that last week the children found Don Muncho dead on the path to his house.

Two years later in December from Regina, Dearest, We are all still awaiting your return. Jose is keeping up your home and the factory is doing well. You will be so proud, we have a contract with a man in Valle who makes lovely metal lamp bases and we are making the shades using some richly textured fibers. He is marketing them through a major retailer in the US so we should be busy for a while. It has been such a morale boost and the women are becoming so skilled and proud . . . Again dearest, I have terrible news . . . Eugenio disappeared two weeks ago.