



Ben Mylius

The first drops of rain

Luz Arriola Huamán lived in a makeshift house, high above a river, in the thick Peruvian Andes. The house was a concoction of board, tarpaulins and planks; it emerged from the rich dirt in space snatched from plants. Those plants towered and wilted, splaying out green leaves and brashly-coloured flowers. Luz went about her tasks as they overpowered the jungle.

Image Robbert van Hooff

The sun rose thick in the morning haze. In the hutch behind her house, Luz's chickens began to wake. They clucked and ruffled their feathers, scratched the first dirt of morning. In bed, Luz stared at the wall. For a moment she sat motionless, wrestling with the demons of sleep. Then she swang her feet onto the earthen floor. She dressed, drank some water from a chipped glass, and left. The door caught on the threadbare rug as it closed.

The sky was a glazed blue, crystalline, as Luz set out along the path that unwound down the mountains. It seemed separate from the earth, held up by humid air. But clouds had gathered between mountains in the distance. They were still flat, painted on. But for Luz they held enough weight to drown the earth. She looked at the clouds and at the river to which their waters would run. The taste of flood was imminent, a death loud with rain. Her body would be the only break in water covering the world.

A group of tourists was beginning an ascent, trailing on the folds at the base of the mountain. Hidden amongst the foliage, Luz watched them. Their tiny blue and red stood out against the murky thread of the river. Slowly, they came, along the path that would lead them to her. She would descend and they would rise, until they met, and she stepped into the shade.

Some of the group would smile and greet her, *hola*, as they passed. Others would ignore her, in awe at their surroundings. Alfredo, or whichever of the young Peruvians was guiding, would nod, and give her a shy smile. Then the group would be gone. It would continue until it reached Luz's house, which the tourists would use as if it were their own. Luz would make her way down to the ruined village, and the river.

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Luz's house had always been a refuge in the mountains. A hikers' haven on the road to Machu Picchu, Peru's wonder of wonders. Everyone enjoyed their brief time amongst succulent greens and the screeching chimes of birds. On a bench beneath the tarp verandah Luz had set up souvenirs. She had some small Inca figurines, and a line of spiral charms. A porcelain condor soared towards the bench's edge. On the corner lay a mask, pinned down by a stone. Normally Luz would have stood ready to attend to her guests. But

it wouldn't matter that she had gone. The guide would know how to close a sale: Paolo, or whichever guide was with them today. He would know where to find the change, if someone decided they were buying.

Most tourists who saw her found Luz as interesting as the mountains. A broad, squat woman, she had Quechua blood and brown skin. She repelled and enthralled her visitors—with her dirty jumpers, pleated skirts, long grey plaits and furrowed hands. She spoke Quechua and Spanish, and fragments of foreign tongues. She had a rudimentary grasp of English (halting sentences, some descriptives), a smattering of German and French (days, times, directions), several pieces of Hebrew and Dutch ('dollars', 'water'), and a word of Japanese ('monkey'). She was a woman of the world, if in a different way to others. Hers was not a world that she had seen but one that came to her, in fragments, in the shapes of tourists who passed.

Some things Luz gleaned as she waited on tourists who'd just arrived, seeing them catch their breath. She held glasses of purple-corn *chicha* or jungle fruits for them to try. At other times she heard stories as she posed for photos. She learned of rage: three blonde girls shared tales of bombs and towers and planes. She learned of finance, and nature: middle-aged Israelis discussed banks and oil spills. Sometimes she learned of lesser things: music, sport, and art. Australians debated rules of football codes in their impenetrable accents. The intricacies were elusive at the speed with which words flew from mouths.

Often the stories were personal. Three Japanese joked about their grandchildren's schools. A woman from Portugal spent her first time away from home since the death of her disabled mother. A Dutch couple shared words with an Austrian and a Spaniard, searching for 'miscarriage'.

Luz gave all the stories equal size and shape in her mental wider world. There was no difference in that world between a lost backpack and a war. They were level in concern, shaped slowly, in phrases and trickling words. From the mouths of passers-through,

Luz's world gradually bloomed.

When the stories had begun, Luz compiled them as if they were her own. But in recent years she'd felt them fade. The tourists who told them returned home. Luz heard reports from the guides, of mudslides and crime in the capital. For a while, they still held interest; but recently, however, they too had withered. The guides who brought them aged and were replaced. As the lines spun across Luz's face, the world beyond began to drift away. More and more, she lived in memories: of Ana, her daughter, and Diego, her son. Oh, Diego.

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In the gap between valleys, the clouds were beginning to move. They remained distant, silent and white; but they'd unstitched themselves from the background. Flowed down.

Luz continued down the mountain. Overhead cried a bird with bright and brilliant plumage. Luz lowered her head. As the clouds drifted out, her world began to close.

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The jungle was a strange, almost mythical place. To live there was to endure small victories in a fight that would one day be futile. Luz remembered a summer morning, years before, when she had found a palm across her clearing. The only clue it had arrived was the dusty outline it had made in its fall. It had lain there as she'd watched it, the river humming in the distance. *I've always been here*, she heard it call. *Will one day have dominion again*. Luz contemplated it for a time before returning with a knife. She cut the palm into pieces and threw it over the trees below her house. As the pieces hit the treetops shifted, the swell around a boat going down. Luz went back inside. Her roof ticked in the first rays of sun.

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A short time later Luz rounded a bend and found a tributary, splashing over the path. Someone had placed two planks over it, but it still wet Luz's feet. The hum of the river was clearer, now, amongst the insects and rustling leaves. Latent, still low. But Luz's memories were strong. Like memories of stepping on glass. The

clouds above were darkening.

This was the Lugar del Agua. Locals sold bottled water here after hiking it up from the village. It had been the favourite haunt of Ana and her cousin Cintya before they'd disappeared. They would stand amongst the foliage, next to a little yellow bucket tied in the tributary, which kept the bottles cool.

The two of them had been gone almost three weeks: perhaps to a friend's, or a village over the mountain. Luz saw a pile of used bottles nearby. She filled one, stiffly, and drank from it. She splashed some water across the tired silk of her face. Over the past year, in the throes of adolescence, Ana's reticence had increased. More and more she vanished, often for weeks on end. Luz never knew to where. She prayed harder in Ana's absence. Several times in the previous weeks, Luz had felt her daughter's looks of ill-disguised contempt. Ana thought Luz should cut her hair, more carefully wash her clothes. Luz, for her part, was uncomfortable with Ana's pink shirts. Grimy things, they'd been presents to the two girls from tourists. Revealed a little too much of the growing body underneath.

The two of them hadn't spoken before Ana disappeared. Still, Ana was a good child. She always brought back the money she made from selling water. Luz hoped she'd return soon, before high season began.

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The clouds had become more insistent, pressing down upon the mountains. Further up the valley they'd broken, smudging as the river transformed. Soon it would rise over the rudimentary bridge.

On Luz's track, the light had changed, strange dimness erasing the shadows of plants. From here, through the trees, she glimpsed the ruined village at the mountain's base. She looked at her sandals instead. There was no sense in confronting those things until she came upon them in person.

In front of her, the undergrowth shifted as a cat-like creature crossed the track. Animals were important to the mantra of this place, for the Incas and others. Luz kept several at her house, in the small space she'd commandeered. There was an agouti, a retiring

brown-furred creature with an anteater's snout, and a small monkey with an old man's wizened skin stretched on the body of a child. The agouti had been around a long time, a gift from a neighbouring village. Diego had caught the monkey when he was young. He was not here, now, but Luz kept the animal he'd brought her. It was tethered like the agouti, on a leather collar and rope.

Most of the tourists loved the animals, cuddling them for photographs. Only some objected. One grey day the previous year, a Canadian woman had grabbed Luz as she emerged from the house with some fruit. 'Look at this!' The woman grabbed the monkey's rope and yanked it to bring the animal to them. It yelped as it was ripped from the agouti, whose fur it had been combing for fleas. When she held the monkey tight, the woman showed Luz the hairless patch beneath its collar. 'It's not right for an animal to be kept like this!' She was right.

Luz took in the woman's leather bag and boots. She waited until the woman had finished speaking before placing some fruit in the dirt. The monkey scampered over for some, which it shared with the agouti. Luz placed the rest on the bench for the tourists. One took a photo and laughed.

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The first drops of rain fell as Luz emerged onto the lowest ridge. The land flattened out, opening and sinking down to the river. Luz braced herself on a tree for a minute to adjust. The river was always vicious, this close. Like the sudden touch of fire after years of living with smoke. For several moments Luz was frozen, as memories shot out like tendrils from her head. Everywhere, her eyes met with them: faces, hearsay, legends. For a moment she was crumpling to the ground. Then she felt the first drops of rain. With an effort, she tore free of the memories. She quickened her pace as much as she could, despite her cracking leather sandals. Carefully, she descended to the track along the river.

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The hardest memories were the snatched ones. They had colours Luz couldn't name, shades that shone most strongly in the dark-

ness of this valley. Unpredictable, constantly subject to change. The first was from fourteen years before, with Ana three, Diego fifteen. The day had been wet, every moment preceding a deluge. Diego went out searching for certain plants, while Ana played around the house. Beneath the verandah lounged some tourists: three Israelis, two Americans, a few Chilean students. They ate snacks and lay in the hammocks. The American couple were in their fifties, and both were keen photographers: the woman, grey and wiry, used a digital, while the man had a new NX-5 dangling at his muscular paunch. At one point, he asked whether there was a bathroom. Luz pointed up a track that led to an outhouse on a terrace.

After a time, Luz moved to the chicken's hutch with rinds of fruit that the tourists had finished. As she scraped them off the plate, she saw the man in front of the outhouse, camera raised. He was partially obscured, about a metre from the outhouse door. The door was open, and Ana was perched on the toilet seat inside.

Luz hurried along the terraces with a heavily-pounding heart. She confronted the man face-to-face, lowering his camera, something now complete. She stared at him until he turned and went back. The voices of the other tourists drifted to them. The group was preparing to leave. Luz turned and glared at Ana, motioning furiously that she should pull up her pants. By now the group was zigzagging up the ridge above; Roy, their guide, turned and waved as they left. All the guides knew the arrangement, that they need not announce when they'd depart. Luz, warmth fading from her face, watched until they were gone. She scolded Ana another time, and then tried to forget.

The other memory was similar: several years later, with three Dutch sisters, two New Zealanders, a British couple and their daughter. They held Luz's figurines in their hands, sitting beneath the verandah. The Britons had sent their daughter to the outhouse.

This time Luz was in her kitchen, preparing the fruit. She looked out the window and saw Diego, seventeen, crouched where she had once stood on the terrace. Only his chest and head were clear above the swaying plants. He was looking through the outhouse

door with an expression of intense concentration. For a moment Luz froze. Then she sent her gaze to hit his chest. He looked around, saw her and jumped, sheepish, adjusting his pants as he vanished along the ridge.

A minute later, the girl returned to her parents. They commented on the fruit Luz had taken outside. She couldn't look them in the eye until they left.

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The sky fell as Luz entered the ruins, turning the jungle's green to black. She trudged through the town that had once held her heart. It persisted, near a paroxysm of water that frothed out of the mountain. The river was now banking, its waters brown with silt, roaring in fury as they churned.

Grey cement slabs rose on Luz's either side as she moved towards the bridge. From afar, they looked like any other jungle village. It was only as tourists got closer that their suspicions coalesced. The position of the slabs betrayed the functions each building had performed: the shop, with rotten shelving; the forestry office, water stains high on its walls. The houses were most unsettling of all, with their stoves and ancient beds. Hikers realised what they were seeing, and conversations ceased. The guides explained that the village's had been built so near the river due to fate. Squinting, the hikers would try to conjure a town from the husk lying before them. But all they could ever see was concrete, and the river's sudden banks.

Luz, for her part, saw the town as it had been. Its histories gently shifted into place before her eyes. An old man she knew sat on a chair outside his store; a child in muddy shorts chased a dog along the road. And then Diego and Ana's younger faces, filling her sight.

Ana darted alongside her, a very young child, darting and weaving through her mother's measured steps. Diego roared down the street on a motorbike, leapt off laughing to embrace her. Ana, slightly older, brought Luz a basket she'd woven. Diego drowned, over and over, in the flood that had claimed the village.

Luz stepped out as the river lapped her sandals, slicked the

bridge's heavy wood. Diego had been mucking around with other village boys, eight years before. They had been daring each other to shimmy across the struts beneath the bridge after similarly heavy rains. He had been a young man, twenty-one. Had finished crossing the river, the most dangerous part of the dare. He had hung on the pole like a monkey as water frothed beneath his back. He only slipped later, as he danced in victory on the far bank, his friends' cheers turning to screams as the water surged and he was claimed. That night, swollen with rain, the flood had overrun the village.

The residents' fear, and mourning, swelled over Luz's personal grief. Diego's name was subsumed into the list of other victims. Luz's private contention was that her son's death was different: but she got no recognition. Gradually, the wounds papered themselves over, but they had never fully healed.

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When the rain stopped, the clouds moved on, to drench another nearby mountain. Luz was the only person on the road. The track rose again, kinking upwards on the other side of the valley. Eventually Luz reached the lookout, gazing far down to the river. She had passed through the new village, built with finances from foreign NGOs. Its few residents, slumped shirtless on chairs beneath their verandahs, had nodded as she'd passed. Now, as ever, she was here.

The logging vehicles had chewed tracks, which bubbled as they hardened to curls. The fibrous limbs and woven skins of plants steamed in the evening air. From around the corner came whoops and screams; Luz turned as a group of tourists on trail bikes sprayed past in a frenzy of mud. Their faces were contorted with excited concentration and fear. The old bikes they were riding bounced and jarred along the road. Ten seconds later they were gone.

A minute or two later, a big red pickup came more slowly round the bend. On its tray sat three bored young Peruvians. They drove for money, today as yesterday, chaperoning the riders. Luz raised her eyebrows a fraction in greeting as they passed. One of them

was a friend of Diego's. She didn't blame them as some others did, for encouraging the tourists who'd pillaged their mountains. Everyone earned a living as they could. They couldn't be held responsible for things they were powerless to resist.

The plants stirred by the riders settled slowly back into place. One lay on the ground at awkward angles, thick mud trampled into its wounds. A bright flower hung from its end. Turning from the river, Luz wiped mud from her arm and set to return. She stood the palm up again as she passed.

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They found her almost a week later, curled on a cushion of broken leaves twenty metres down the mountain from her house. A Scottish tourist saw her through his binoculars. Quickly, he sought the attention of his tour guide, Eduardo, who'd been discreetly looking himself. Eduardo was only 21, and this finding was not something for which he'd prepared. Unsure, he looked down from the terrace. Finally he sent the man back to the group, instructing him to cut up some mangoes for the others. When the man had left, protesting ineffectually, Eduardo clambered down, holding plants for balance. When he reached the terrace above Luz he crossed himself three times. Then he stood, three metres above the leaves on which she lay. For a long time he willed himself to move, hoping the same for the crumpled body below. Was that a slight twitch of muscles he'd seen? Or, he realised, just a soft curl of breeze, the whisper of plants as they breathed. Eduardo crossed himself again, and then prepared to descend. He crouched, to jump down – and then stumbled as she moved. For sure, this time: there were no illusions. Eduardo froze. Then, realising what he was seeing, he leaped clumsily from the ledge. He stumbled the final few metres to kneel in the rotting leaves, where Luz was now sitting up. Frowning, she moved slowly, as though battling to wake from a dream. She reached behind her, stiffly, to bring her plait to her front. Deliberately, oblivious to Eduardo's presence, she cleaned it of debris.

Legs shaking, Eduardo moved back. As he watched Luz brush her hair, he realised that moments earlier, on the ledge, his mind

had run away with him. Guilt, blame, excuses. Then reality, the fact that the body was too heavy for him alone. The situation would be the same for every guide who came: suddenly elevated in the group's wary eyes, carrying a burden he could not let them share. Eduardo saw each guide going through the same process: too weak to lift the body, unable to wait for a second, third, fourth guide. Heretical to leave the group waiting, to entangle them in this death.

Waiting on the terrace, Eduardo had seen how the process would resolve itself. Each of the tour guides would snatch a few minutes to dig some spoonfuls for a grave. The hole would gradually widen, until the next guide could roll the body into it, hear the soft thud as it landed. Then the next guide and those after scooping a few handfuls each visit, until the body was covered by earth.

As Luz, with voluminous effort, got to her feet, Eduardo realised what had blown into his head. As she turned and moved up the slope, dirt clinging to her back, he saw those possibilities had existed somewhere else. That he was still a young man, a boy in this whole business. And that he could not know what it would mean until it was done.

Fists trembling, Eduardo stumbled after Luz, respectfully bowing his head. The two of them moved through the green trunks and fanlike fronds, towering and wilting all around. Back up towards the house, where the tourists would be sitting, mango skins long since cast upon the ground. The tourists, contemplating the beauty of the mountains. The tourists, waiting, as the world flowered around them, for the next phase of their journey to begin.

Ben Mylius, 22, is a young writer based in Adelaide. He's fascinated by memories and the borders of language, and has been thinking about Luz since he finished volunteering up a steep cobbled alley at a school in Peru. 
