

ANGEL'S ORACLE



In the South of 1959, horrific events over a three-day Easter weekend prove to a hard-working albino white man that he fits in better with the ‘coloreds’ than he does with his own ‘white folk.’

With gritty realism and wondrous mysticism, *Angel's Oracle* focuses on the microcosm of Angel, Mississippi – America from 1859 to 1959 to the present. *Angel's Oracle* tells the story of free will, race relations, religion's influence on capitalism, the love of one brother for another, and the power of myth, religion, and history to shape love and hate, and to sway man toward failure and redemption.

ANGEL'S ORACLE



by

Gary Bolick

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

~AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT~

To Ruth, Claude, Germaine, and Jill ... my four winds.



I painted it in a strong mistral with my easel plugged into the ground with some iron pegs, a tip I can recommend. You push the feet of the easel into the ground with iron pegs 20 inches long beside them. Tie the whole thing up with string. Then you can work in the wind.

~Vincent van Gogh (from a letter to Emile Bernard)

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The Legend of the Four Winds

Angel, Mississippi, is the site of an unusual natural phenomenon about which the townsfolk have long recited the legend of its origin. This legend has reached near mythical proportion, creating an odd tourist trade for Angel. The legend stems from the creation of the Four Winds and, according to old-timers in Angel, generally goes something like this...

After the revolt, not all of the dissenting angels were cast down into hell. Four were banished, expelled from the confines of heaven, and scattered – exiled among the winds – to silence their questioning voices. Their crime? None. Not unless you count free will.

No hand was raised in defiance, no spirit or being was betrayed, slighted, or deceived. No. Each had done nothing but wonder out loud and question both sides of the struggle. Dismayed with the answers offered them, they each went before the Master and asked to be excused – to leave heaven. All that these four angels desired was a release from both heaven and hell, a chance to take flight, to cross the borders and answer for themselves their own riddles. Each wanted an opportunity to explore and to discover the infinite possibilities of good, evil, hope, and indifference as individuals free from the petty, onerous constraints and commandments that ruled both camps. They wanted a chance to see the universe not as a god, but as a being ‘free of all gods.’ They each wanted to experience the universe as a woman, or as a man.

Lucifer laughed, shook his head, and warned them, “Come with me while you can. What you’re asking for is more than a revolution, it’s a question ... a denial of His worth, His right to rule, His control. It makes my rebellion seem childish. All I wanted was

power, so He granted it, but on His terms. You see, He and I were face-to-face, dealing from the same deck. Yours is very different. No god, or even a man for that matter, wants to be questioned – or worse, unmade. But a free will and a curious spirit challenge a despot. They call into question both His divine right and the foundation of that right – His kingdom, if you will. Free will is the only part of the universe He can't control. Just be careful ... He and I are a lot alike.”

After dispatching Lucifer and his followers, God turned to the lone remaining four ‘difficulties,’ he called them. “You four wish to possess the wisdom of heaven, earth, and the entire universe ... possess all the knowledge of good and evil, and – let Me get this straight – do so through *your*, not My ... through your *own* free will? And to make this ... this *request* perfect, you want to experience it as men – *free* – men!”

A blue wind swirled up from each of His hands and made still all who had gathered to witness the judgment of the four, made them shudder as they watched the heretics being swept up, out, and then inserted – locked away – in the bellies of four separate winds forever. But He cast them, not into just any four errant winds, but into the gentle breezes that bathed the gardens of his prized new creation, Eden.

Perfect, He mused. *In this way, the four will touch man in every way; fill his lungs, stroke his hair, and make cool his day, but never ... never will they be allowed to become free men.* It was a sentence that excited, and pleased the Master, while making real to those who witnessed the judgment His power, His just and permanent power. He smiled.

Exiled and separated from one another, the four angels and their questions were silenced, forever muted, but still a part of the world, as they had requested. Order was restored heaven, hell, and the new paradise. All was once again protected and controlled.

Centuries passed, and the winds – their prisons – became almost tolerable. But the loss of one another, the desolation of living without the company of friends, became unbearable. That was, they learned, the true penalty for their disobedience: an eternity hovering within an eyelash of paradise, man, and the other winds, the prisons

of their closest, and dearest friends.

It was a 'miracle' of creativity, the Master mused. If the angels resisted their enslaver, it would worsen their plight. As though caught in a pool of quicksand, their attempts to break free only pushed them deeper into the wind's grasp, making their voices still more distant and difficult to understand.

Disheartened, each began to consider the scope of their collective sentence. *It was one matter to be exiled and imprisoned, but entirely another when it involved the loss of your friends. But what to do? How was it possible to see or touch the other? Will this be the sum, the remainder of my existence? Will I forever be sewn into the fabric of the shifting winds, forced to move aimlessly, calling out, knowing that my voice will never be heard? Why was such a cruel punishment meted out for so simple a request? Was it the questions? Was it the freedom? Was it that we asked for a life that resembled His own? Was that the one freedom we asked for that frightened Him so?*

Still more time passed, and the chilling blue wind that had shuttled the angels out of heaven began to seem more and more like the love of a stern but benevolent father. Though still held captive, now, no more than an occasional howl or whistle was heard from the angels locked away in the breezes of paradise. The angels, so it appeared, had learned the Master's lesson and were now subdued. They seemed content to bathe the Master's prized, perfumed gardens with soft, gentle breezes, and then sleep. It was order, perfect order, everywhere the eye decided to light.

As free as the wind. Each exiled angel in his turn mused over the newfound irony of that worn old phrase. Free to do what ... to shout, struggle, and slip deeper into the belly of their captor? Or, free to come close, to watch, listen, and tend His gardens, and then sleep; either way they were still His slaves. Or maybe, just maybe it was possible to plot an escape from this unchanging air and – what? Then listen to His laughter each time they attempted to free themselves and failed?

Eventually, even the strongest among the four began to waver. Each wondered if perhaps their slavery was not, after all, a fair compromise for such open insolence. Who were they to question, to demand a freedom denied all the others. Are not exile and prison the

only alternatives to freedom? And if not ... how could each tell the others, let them know that there was still a chance?

But no sooner had that question been posed, a strange incident occurred. The winds stopped, not a pause, but halted – dead still. Was it possible? What had they overlooked? Did they, indeed, have at least a small measure of control? Then as a spark to fire, the notion suddenly burned clear. *Yes! Yes, as free as the wind – that's it!* Rather than wrestle or attempt to deny their enslaving winds, they had to create a freedom as a part of them, use what remained of themselves – a will, a spirit, and a voice – to *free* themselves within themselves and their prisons, to become like the butterflies, the ones in the garden, the creatures who transform themselves, who spin, and then break free of their prisons and fly!

And so each of the four angels closed his eyes, and remembered. Thought of the others, of their lives together, the laughter, and the reasons why they were all locked away in their invisible prisons. Thought of their winds, not as jails, but as new bodies, the perfect expression of their will. *I ... we ... each of us, must try, must not surrender, but make it our own. Make these winds the shelter, the cocoons of our transformation.* And no sooner had each one thought of this, the air stopped, and its stillness silenced everything in paradise.

Faint laughter began to snake up and out from the bowels of the underworld. A massive, blue, swirling wind appeared in the center of the otherwise clear sky, then raced down and descended straight toward the still winds of Eden, lashing and binding everything in its path until, inexplicably, it suddenly floundered and then disappeared. Its attempt to seize the silent air of paradise failed. With the gods on high and low dismissed, the air within and without the walls of Eden exploded...

Exploded and roared out in four separate and distinctive voices. One blast of air howled, while another sang the aria of a soprano. The third voice sounded like the moan of an ice-locked river breaking up in a thaw. And the final sound was more hiss than voice, more heat than noise, a sweltering wave of steam-heavy heat that made every plant in the gardens of Eden immediately flower. The air was suddenly their own, alive with relentless, unfettered

change. Gone were the unwavering, obedient breezes that once lapped the Master's gardens with soft, silent air. Replacing them now were four big-horned rams crashing into one another; four old friends finally reunited in and of the will of *their* winds.

The four, or rather, the will of the four exiled angels had changed the face of paradise forever. Each was still separate but equal and now able to talk to the other. Their different personalities eventually gave birth to their names, the ones we still use today: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter.

And even now they constantly roam the earth, never tiring of the change, the laughter, and the friendship they create when they visit one another. Touching and embracing one another as they trade places, their friendships seem to have strengthened rather than diminished with each passing year. Each is never very far from the other or above dropping in unannounced. A spring day in the middle of winter, an Indian summer tagging along at the end of fall, each wind, or rather, each angel, never allows the other to grow lonely or despondent. For each remembers the smirk and the denial that placed them here. And each relishes, no *adores*, the uneasy, imperfect freedom they won. For this freedom is neither the equal of *His* or any other *He* might choose. This freedom is simply their own.



The Oracle

“Fill’er up, sir?”

“Yes, sir, that’s right. Angel, just Angel. Rock? Oh, you mean *that* rock. Yes, sir, you’re headin’ in the right direction. Damnedest thing you ever saw ... and purty ain’t the half of it. Deep. It’s real deep in the woods, ‘bout two miles south of where we’re standing. Just ‘bout where the old Burley plantation runs into the river is where it sits and never moves. ‘Course, I guess no rock ever gonna git up and move ... but you’ll see, you’ll know what I mean once you *see* her, ah, it ... the rock.

“Dad-blamedest piece of white marble you ever saw. Tongue-shaped, smooth as silk, shines like a new dime. Sits up nice as can be on a grass-covered mound, right smack in the middle of a shallow pool. But what really makes it so different ... no, I mean *spiritual*, are the slits that run through her. Kinda like the reeds in a harmonica, or the stops in a flute. It’s the wind. Whenever it blows, she, the rock, I mean, goes to singing ... or whistling, moaning, or ... well, I ain’t exactly figured out what you’d call it, ‘cause, you see, it changes every day, every season, sometimes every minute ... all the time.

“It’s Godawful purty, but kinda scary ... the sounds she makes. Her music crawls in through your ears, and starts to wrestle with your blood. You know, gives you that squirrelly kinda ... I don’t know whether I got to pass water, or maybe I’m just a little horny sorta feeling. Oh, please excuse me, ma’am. I ... well, I guess what I mean is, the sounds that rock makes ... well, it just plain stirs you up. Makes your insides touch things they don’t normally feel, not unless you’ve been involved in some kind of love, or death, or some big, uncomfortable change has taken place.

“White folks always called it Angel’s Oracle, but the slaves,

they named her Moses' Rock. Yeah, but everybody agreed on one thing, and that's how she got to singing the way she does. It's the four angels, the ones that got themselves exiled. It's them that done all the work.

"So you've heard that story? Oh yeah, I guess that's why you're here, why most folks pass through here ... 'cause of the rock – and golf. Me? No. But that's quite a place ... had the PGA there one time. I believe Hagen ... yes, sir, that's right. Walter Hagen won it that year. They say he can still play pretty well for a man his age. Drops by the park every so often. Even stopped by here one time. That Jaguar of his takes – God it's a sight – won't take anything but high-test. Yes, sir, he's something. Anyway. All that land where the golf course and park sit, why it's all just a tiny part of the old Burley place.

"Well, anyway ... each one of them angels with its own wind and season bore a slit clean through that rock. That way the angels could speak to man. That is, if you can decipher what that particular wind during that particular season is trying to say. For example, maybe you have a spring day in the fall, or couldn't rightly tell which slit was catching what wind. You see what I mean? Well, who's to say? The angels speak to us each and every day, but who can decipher what they're trying to tell us?

"But legend has it, if you're willing to go down there everyday during the year, you'll begin to learn the language of each wind, or season, or ... I guess I should say angel. The story has it that eventually you'll begin to feel it – their message – more than really hear it. You'll start to feel as they did, and understand the reasons why they were exiled, and what they were thinking and feeling even before they were banished from heaven, into the winds.

"Some say it's a sense of things, a wisdom that's been trapped between heaven and hell, like some wireless or unconnected electricity that will show man his place, not only on earth, but where he fits in ... in the whole ... ah, I mean, the entire universe. You know ... explain to us why we're still scratchin' around, lookin' both ways up and down the road, waitin' on a bus that still ain't come by, and probably never will. And tell us ... ah, excuse me, I'm getting off track. Let's see where was I? Oh yeah.

"And those same people claim that sewn into the winds are

hundreds of personal messages and riddles, special ideas, difficult questions answered. It's all there. The angels are desperate to tell us, but we just don't know how to listen.

"Even had some fella, a professor from down in Louisiana – you know, from the college in Baton Rouge. Yes, sir. He drove all that way up here just to look at and listen to Moses' Rock. Said he was a classics teacher. He was telling me all 'bout a thing they had in Greece called the Oracle at Del Ray, no, Del ... Delphi. Yes, that's it. Thank you. Said it was right near the center of the universe back then. He stopped by on his way home. He just smiled a lot, had a few beers, and had me tell him all I knew 'bout Burley, his slaves, my family, and well, he picked my brain for close to three hours. Said no poem, psalm, or piece of music had ever moved him like the sounds of that rock. He comes back by to say hello at least once every spring and fall.

"Me? Well, I still don't know. But ... well, there must be something to it. I ... I don't claim to have any great understanding of it ... it's just ... well, it was my granddaddy Ezra. It's what he said one time, a long time ago, that keeps *me* going down there.

"I couldn'ta been more than five when he told me that story. But even today, everyday for that matter, I hear him telling it to me once more. I hear the clipped, slow sounds of his words stretching out and unwinding in front of me – dancing – through my eyes to nuzzle and curl round my brain and mesmerize me. His words take me and lead me to a place where his sounds seem to unfold and fly. Like they've been stored away, waiting for me whenever I need them. It's as though his words and sounds are trapped on some of that ancient, dried-up yellow paper ... on a scroll. And when I think of him, I go there, and it unrolls, and the strange, black handwriting grows restless and moves, it changes into notes, and I hear him – Ezra – again.

"It's like he and that story will never die. Kinda like the rock, I guess. In some ways, I still don't believe he's dead, even though it's been forty-four years since he passed on. Yeah. That's right, 1915, but it still feels as though he's right here with me. Seems like he's still alive, only just away somewhere watching me, maybe from behind a tree or a rock ... being real quiet and still, watching me ...

making sure I'm okay.

"The way my granddaddy told it, every Sunday old man Burley's slaves would hold church out by Angel's Oracle. In fact, from sunrise to sunset, one group after another of slaves would arrive from all over the county to hear preaching and sing by what they called Moses' Rock.

"Ezra said it was the third Sunday in August, 1859. He was thirty high water mark of his life sitting in the town square, eyeing the ladies, smoking a nickel stogie, sipping some bourbon mash, and playing cards with his three best buddies. Sun was out, but it was unnatural cool for August, more a fall day than summer. The sky, he said, was cobalt blue.

"As he was drawing into a queen high flush, he noticed that the gospels floating in over the trees from Angel's Oracle had a real mellow, almost somber tone. No jumps or shouts, just a massive, collective humming, like the choir was so overwhelmed, they were moaning rather than singing. After his comments 'bout how much the music had changed fell on deaf ears, Ezra just shrugged and went back to his flush. But he was still a little more than curious at what might be going on down by Moses' Rock.

"Then, about ten minutes later, when granddaddy was raking in his winnings from a pair of kings – boom – dead silence. No singing, moaning, humming – nothing. No one but Ezra really noticed or cared that the choir of slaves had stopped singing. But they had, and nothing but complete and total silence was everywhere. Ezra was amazed how the movement of the town square remained unchanged: pockets of conversation still hummed, men dipping their heads to passing ladies ... no one – save himself – seemed to have noticed the sudden halt to the music.

"After about thirty minutes, Ezra began to lose interest, until ... until something, as he put it, 'something simple but magically profound,' occurred. A lone baritone voice, as deep and clear as a mountain well, began to pour into the town square. Like a falcon holding onto an updraft, then deftly striking downwind, that slave's voice struck cleanly into the heart of Angel.

"Ezra marveled at the clarity of the words; it seemed that slave was standing right next to him. He understood every single word that man sang. It was a spiritual called 'Sea of Joy.' It told the story of

Moses leading the children of Israel through the desert. 'Bout how the men and women wandering through the desert would never see the promised land, but their children, the fruit of their love, would take them, bridge them to Canaan, turning the desert into their sea of joy. I can see Ezra with his eyes closed, singing the verse...

*'Each tear my baby cries in this dry, barren desert
Gonna wash his child with freedom in the Promised Land.*

*Each tear my baby cries in this dry, barren desert
Carries the salt of my love given in a sea of joy.'*

"And, as Ezra told it, after that lone voice sang the last words of the final verse, it happened. His heart, the air, life itself seemed to stop. And then the air exploded as all the slaves – and there must have been hundreds – at Moses' Rock, in perfect unison, sang the phrase, 'the salt of my love given in a sea of joy.'

"Ezra said he broke out in a cold sweat. The whole town stopped dead and just looked up. Like a photograph, nobody moved, all of them motionless, dumb struck, listening to a thunderstorm of voices fill the town, the air – themselves – with the sound of living. Turns out a baby boy had just been born and baptized, all right there by Moses' Rock. Named him Moses Jewel Monroe. Said he was the 'jewel' of Moses' Rock.

"The singing continued the rest of that Sunday evening on into the night. Ezra was the last to leave the town square. Said he'd never seen or heard anything that beautiful last so long.

"That afternoon and evening changed Ezra forever. Said he could never look on another man ever again and call him a slave. From that day forward, he started letting slaves come into his dry goods store. Even gave some a line of credit. Made things kinda sticky for Ezra, but he didn't care. Said people in Angel got to change. But of course they didn't, and Ezra's store almost went under. Would have, except the war broke out a year and a half later. And with rationing, people's politics kind of crawled out the back door. "But once the war was over, people started back treating Ezra real poorly. Ezra says he knew that things would never be the same again 'cause he knew nobody in Angel was ever going to change, unless you could make money from it. So Ezra just got by the best he could.

“Way Ezra told it, he exiled himself, just like the angels. Said that’s why a story lives. Hangs around to be told another day, to fit itself into the situation at hand, to help those smart enough to listen. Trouble is, though, Ezra didn’t have three other friends, you know like the angels. No, poor ol’ Ezra didn’t really fit in anywhere ... not with the whites, nor the coloreds. But somehow, deep down, he knew what he was doing was right. It was good, and it mattered – at least it did to Ezra. Turns out it did make a difference to some others, too.

“To show their appreciation to Ezra, the coloreds always invited him down to Moses’ Rock for Sunday service and singing. He was the only white ever accorded that honor. Made Ezra bust out with pride, and just smile. So, yes, sir! Yes, he figured he must be doing something right, so he kept on, as best he could, making ends meet with his store, and singing (way off key), but happy, down at Moses’ Rock.

“When he turned fifty, things started working out a little better. With the coloreds starting to own their own property and businesses, the town had to start seeing things a little differently. They sort of forgave Ezra for how he stood up for the slaves. But then granddaddy really went and stepped in it. Ezra fathered a child, a boy, with a young mulatto woman named Sarah. Little boy’s name was Joshua. Yes, sir, that’s right, he was my daddy.

“Well Sarah had a real tough time delivering daddy, and died ‘bout three weeks after he was born. Broke Ezra clean in two. My great-aunt Essie pretty much raised daddy, ‘cause Ezra, he was just plain spent from losing his Sarah.

“Didn’t take long before the store was out of business, and Ezra just drifted away, working odd jobs and staying drunk most of the time.

“One night somebody found him face down in the mud behind a bar in Yula. When they rolled him over, all he could say, I mean babble, was for Sarah to come back. Started screaming how he was gonna square it with the Lord, was gonna duel him straight up for taking his Sarah away.

“He never really got better after that night. Never knew whether it was some bad liquor ... you know some mash that’s been run through a radiator, or maybe it was the clap, or just plain

loneliness. Anyway, Essie had him committed to the state mental hospital. And that's how I got to know him ... going to visit him once every six months, or so.

"Sometimes Ezra would recognize us right off immediately. Pick me up, put me in his lap, play with me, and then just hold me for a while. Other times he'd just sit in the corner, mumbling, calling for Sarah, shooting a finger skyward, warning the Lord how he was smarting for him. You just never knew which Ezra you'd find waiting for you.

"Well, the last time I saw him, it was the good, clear-headed Ezra. He told me all 'bout old man Burley's slaves, the singing, his lovely wife my grandmother, and he even hugged daddy. They cried and said it was gonna be all different. And it was different. Ezra died a week later.

"A few years later, in the first war, daddy got gassed pretty bad. Came back from France coughing and all shrunk up. He just wasted away, in and out of VA hospitals, fighting to get a good, deep breath until he just gave out ... October 5, 1923, a Tuesday afternoon ... 2:05. I was only fourteen. I didn't think you could die during the day ... not in broad daylight, not with the sun out, and the birds singing, and the leaves being so pretty.

"So I had to go and live in the children's home after that. No, I never really knew my momma. She got pneumonia when I was 'bout three. Took her real fast. I remember her eyes, mostly, kinda of a watery gray-green. And her smile, I can still see that too.

"I dream of her coming to me from out of the sun. I guess that's from when she would bend over to pick me up. I kind of remember that too.

"Her dyin' broke daddy 'bout the way Sarah's dyin' broke granddaddy. But he recovered enough to at least look after me with some help from the neighbors.

"Momma was a mix just like Sarah. Only, I think she was an octoroon, not mulatto. But, anyway ... me? No. No, I've never put too much stock in color, seeing as how I'm pretty much a mutt myself. You know, white, black, Indian, and maybe even a little Mexican thrown in – least ways that's what the boys at the children's home would say when they teased me.

“But goodness, listen to me. I’ve gone on way too long. Excuse me. Yes, sir. Take that road for ‘bout a mile, then you’ll see a small white post with an angel painted on it. Just follow the path that’s directly behind it. It’s gonna wind around a little bit, but as long as you keep heading toward the river, you’ll be okay. You’ll find it. Everybody who’s really looking for it does. Purty ain’t the word.

“I go there at least once a week. I swear, sometimes, I actually see Ezra and daddy down there. I know I can hear them. Even on a calm day, I still get a sense of them being there with me. And when the wind blows, well ... you start listening to how it pipes through the rock, wondering out loud and, well ... it’s real pleasant down there. I guess that’s why I’ve never left Angel, or ever will leave.

“But listen to me getting started again. Be careful walking on that path, and be sure to check yourself for ticks. This spring they seem to be worse than ever. Stop off on your way back if you’ve a mind to.

“Oh excuse me. My name? Jewel, well that’s the name I go by. Ezra gave it to me the last day I saw him. Yes, sir. That’s right, just like that slave born down by the rock. Ezra said looking at me sitting in his lap made him remember how good he felt that day.

“Yes, sir, you’re right, he was really something. Please stop by here on the way out, or come have some lunch over at my diner. It’s a couple of miles from here, on the right-hand side of the road, just ‘bout a mile from town. You can’t miss the sign, she’s a marvel, she is! Yes, sir, helped design it, and then put it up myself.

“Hope I see you folks later.”