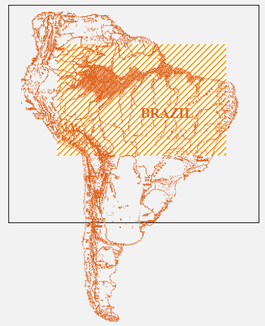
The Inheritors
Children of Gold

They are children without fathers, without older brothers. They are the inheritors of this madness.

— Padre Mario Zingarini,
Salesian Missionary, Manicore'



The preacher and I drove through the jungle all night so we'd reach the Serra Pelada before sunrise. The miners work only in the morning and then in the late afternoon until dark. Sometimes longer. No one works past mid-day. The sun will kill you.

Pelada means "naked" or "skinless". That's why they named this place Serra Pelada, because the heat scorches you to the bones when you're in the mine.

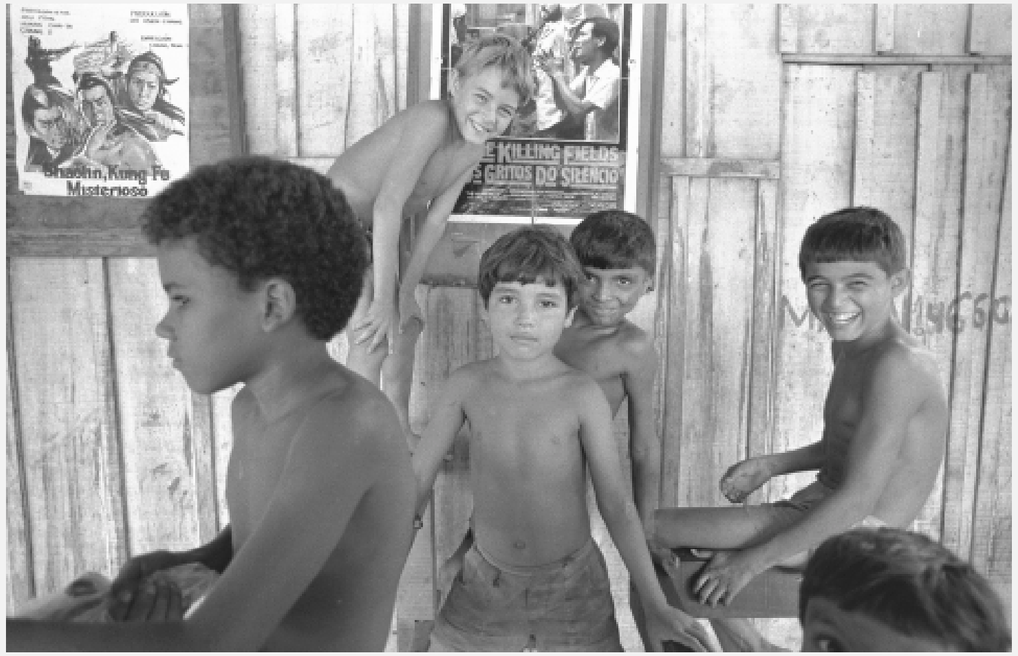
It's an open pit three-quarters of a mile long. When the gold was good, there were 15,000 claims and more than 200,000 men, women and children digging and hauling ore. They pulled out 112 tons of gold in just one year. All dug and carried out by hand. Every bit of it. They carried the ore one sack at a time up wooden ladders to the top and then a half mile away to the tailings pile. One sack at a time, until the hole was almost 800 feet to the bottom and the tailing pile was over a mile long. But they dug too deep and the hole filled half up with water. Most of the miners went home after that. Those that stayed on nick-named it *The Devil's Pit* because men died down there. Today, only about 5,000 miners are left, not counting the children.

No one knows how many children are in the Serra Pelada. Most of the younger ones, under twelve or so, don't have real fathers. Back in '84 when the gold was good, the miners brought women in so they wouldn't have to leave their claims to have sex. So there's a lot of orphans. Most of the boys over eight work in the pit, either shoveling or carrying out rock in burlap sacks that, even half full, weigh more than they do.

The preacher stood by and watched as I photographed. Suddenly, he stripped down to the waist, picked up an empty sack and started off toward the pit. I called after him, but he didn't hear me and soon disappeared into the great hole amidst a multitude of miners coming and going with their sacks.

I photographed until the sun got too high, too hot. They say that when your shadow is as long as you are tall, it's time to leave the pit. So I did. I was almost out when I turned back to take one last photograph. A boy was climbing out of the pit and moving toward me with his rock sack slung over his shoulder. When he reached me he stopped, looked up, and without uttering a word, without opening his mouth, said *I am the Beginning and the End.* Then he smiled as though he'd live forever.

— Last diary entry, the author, in the Serra Pelada mines, known as the Devil's Pit



I still don't know, after being here seven years, how these people make a living.

— Padre Bento Humaita'

We have electricity 24 hours a day, an airport, a post office, two banks, a TV station, an FM radio station 99Mhz, a movie house, hotels, two Catholic churches, 400 stores, 21 taxis, 30 trucks, a gast staion, twelve drug stores, three sawmills, a dentist, a bus line and God knows how many nightclubs and whorehouses. Only we can't drink alcohol. It's against the law here. For security reasons. But we do it anyway, you know. Unfortunately, we don't have a hospital or any schools. They say there are over 8,000 children here, but no one knows for sure. There's more everyday. We put them to work in the mines.

— Juvenal Mauro da Silva , gold miner, Serra Pelada mines

Two boys pushed their hands through the opened window of the restaurant and dangled two condoms at me. "Safety sex, safety sex," said the smaller one. I thought they were begging for food. But they wanted money. Money for condoms. Maybe they wanted money for sex.

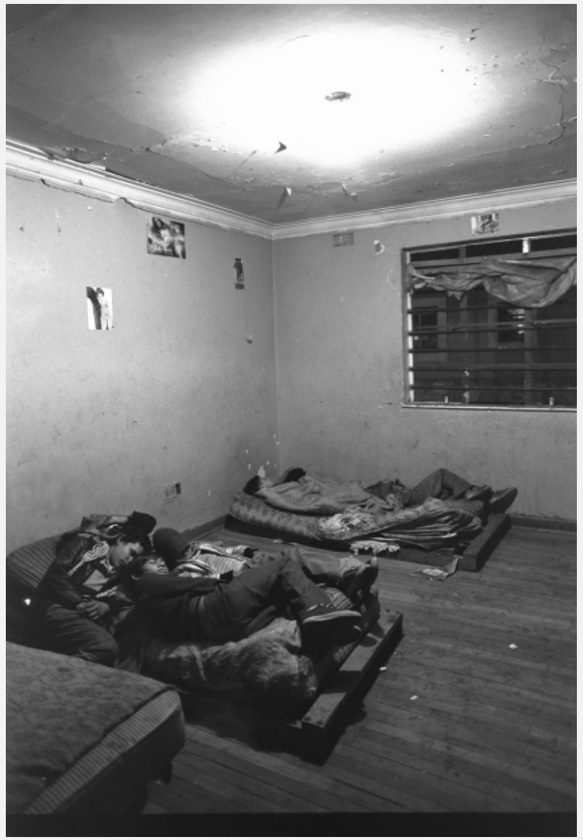
— Diary entry, the author, Manaus

They put a big snake into our attic to kill the rats. At night, when I'm sleeping, I get scared because I'm afraid the snake will eat so many rats that he'll get so big and crash down on top of me. And spiders's, too. It's hard to get to sleep sometimes, but I'm getting used to it

— Eight year old, living on the Madeira River, near Borba

What's more important? Children or gold? Everyone worries more about gold than any of these little ones. God will never forgive us for this. Never.

— Padre Bento LaFevre, Missionary, Manicore'



Their father's couldn't make it in the south. They couldn't make it in the forests. They didn't make it in the gold mines. Now they think they can make it here in the city. The won't, and their kids will starve.

— Umberto Brandoa, Filho Banker, Porto Velho

Two teenagers got on *Haley's Comet* going from Manaus to Porto Velho. They boarded in the middle of the night, at Murutinga, the last stop before the boat turns south from the Amazon into the wide mouth of the Madeira. They said they were selling encyclopedias to win a scholarship to college. They said they had to sell thirty cases of books on this trip, and they would go to Borba, Nova Aripuanha, Manicore', and Humaita' to do it. They'd even go as far as Porto Velho itself, the big city at the end of the Madeira, if they had to. That was their plan.

When they got to Borba they marched into a small general store. The owner was behind a desk doing figures in a blue notebook. The first boy went to work on him. The second boy kept stacking books up in front of the owner's face. First came two large volumes with an explanation of why those would be good for his business. Then five more followed by a speech on the importance of education for his children. Then six more with grandiose words about his son's future. The more the first boy pitched, the higher the stack of books got. He never took his eyes off the store owner. The faster he talked, the faster the second boy pulled books out and thrust them into his partner's waiting hands. They were smooth, practiced, like a gunner and a gunner's mate.

"Do I have to buy all of them?" the store owner finally asked.

"No," said the first boy. "But think of your son's future. He needs a full education, not half an education."

The store owner stared up at the stack of books. It was four feet high and wavering. He began to say something but didn't. The boy struck his last and final blow.

"Take them all and I'll throw in this one last book free, plus another ten percent off the list price," he said, and without looking around, snapped his fngers at his partner. The other boy pulled out a large hard-bound volume with red letters printed across the cover: *How To Be Successful And Make Money*, and slapped it down on the table. The pile of books jiggled and teetered to the left. There was a long silence. The boys waited. The store owner sat behind the pile, staring at it, motionless. A fly started buzzing against a window pane somewhere in the store but then stopped.

"No," said the man suddenly, and he shook his head without looking up.

"I have a family to feed. Stomachs first. Then their heads." He stood up and the stack started falling over. The boy caught the books and asked him if he was sure. The man gave him a look that said he was sure he had kids who were hungry and that was that.

The two teenagers packed the books back into the boxes and without a word went out into the heat.

"We had him.," the second boy said in whispered tones. "We had him, right to the end we had him."

"No we didn't," said the first boy. "We never had him."

— Diary entry, the author, on Haley's Comet between Porto Velho from Manaus, a five day trip.

A child crawled into the restaurant on her belly. Her legs were thin and deformed, like bone covered with skin but no flesh. She dragged them behind her like something that got caught on her body. It was polio or something worse. She crawled over to a gold miner who had just started to eat. Pulling one leg at a time under her, she half sat, half leaned against the table leg. She stared up at him but said nothing. He tried to ignore her by turning away toward the television over the bar. There was a quiz show on and people were winning money.

"They all want money," he muttered.

The crippled child kept looking at the back of his head. Finally, he turned around and looked down. His eyes rivited on hers, as though he didn't want to look at her legs, at her deformity.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Some help," she said.

"What kind of help?"

She didn't say anything.

"Do you want to eat?" he asked.

"Yes."

He said nothing. They just stared at each other. Finally, he blinked.

"Give some food to her," he said aloud, to the waitress, to anyone who would hear him. "Something, anything, to eat," he said as he pulled cruzados out of his pocket and threw them down on his table.

The waitress brought a plate of rice and black beans with some chicken mixed in. She picked the little girl up from the floor. Her legs dangled lifelessly under her. She put her on a chair at the table next to the miner's.

A little boy appeared out of nowhere and sat at the girl's table across from her. He didn't say anything. He just waited and looked at her with his tongue pressed between his lips. The girl didn't eat at first. Instead, she divided what was on her plate and gave one half to the boy, then they both ate.

Suddenly, the miner threw his fork down at his plate and stood up. He took what was left of his bottled mineral water and put in on the table between the two children without looking at them. They didn't look up either and he left.

— Diary entry, the author, Ruropolis, at the intersection of the Transamazonic highway and the Santarem-Itaituba highway

The children and the Indians. They have no choice in the matter. They get what we give them.

— Anonymous gold miner, Paapiu, in the Surucucu', Roraima

It's to help them not feel the hunger.

— Nacelio Cavalcanti de Sousa, TV reporter from Sao Paulo explaining why the Indian children chew bene' *, a natural tobacco leaf.*

You can hear the helicopters overhead all day. They flying loaded with gold. Millions of dollars of gold everyday for the White man. And our women and children have to go six kilometers away from our village to find fish or drinking water because the miners shit and piss and dump mercury into our streams. When the sun goes down, they stop flying and so it gets quiet, except for the cries of our children who are sick and starving.

— David Yanomani, Chief of the Yanomani Tribe, referring to the Mahauteri Indian village, the Surucucu', Roraima

They're surrounded by death from the day they're born. Half the children die before they reach puberty. Mostly disease. Sometimes their fathers kill them in a fit of rage, or when they're drunk. If they have fathers. There are a lot of orphans. They lost their fathers and brothers to the mines or the jungle. Or to fighting and murder. The children that are left get used to death. It doesn't bother them so much. Those are the ones I worry about, the ones that don't feel much anymore.

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, (Padre Moses), Mutum

I first met Patria Amada on the Transamazonic high way in 1972. His real name was Adoao Merois da Rosa, but everyone called him Patria Amada — *The One Who Loves His Country*. I photographed him together with his wife Altamira, and Tito, their eleven-year old son. Twenty years later, I went back to the Amazon looking for him.

I found him in Belem, far from the jungles of the Transamazonic highway. He was with his wife and granddaughter – their son's only child. She was about eleven years old. She never knew her father. But she knew his name. It was Tito, she told me, and she knew he was blond and had blue eyes. She knew he was a gold miner and that someday he'd come home rich. But that's all she knew, and in the end it probably wasn't enough, so she didn't think about him much.

They told me the whole story: of how Tito grew up, found a woman before he was nineteen and married her. Right off, he got his wife pregnant and then left for the gold mines. To make money. To make a living, he said. They told of how Tito wrote the first year or so but then stopped. The baby was born, but Tito never knew it. They never heard from or saw him again. The girl was young, only fifteen, and couldn't raise the baby alone. So Patria Amada and Altamira raised her like one of their own.

I pulled out a photograph I'd shot of the family homesteading on the Transamazonic highway back in '72. Patria Amada was wearing a torn t-shirt with the words *Transamazonic Highway - Love It or Leave It* printed on the front. His hat was weathered and his black boots were covered with the red mud of the road. Altamira sat next to Tito, who was holding a dog in his lap. Except for a pair of shorts, he was naked and blond and blue eyed. He was smiling and dirty-faced like an eleven year old can get.

"That's your father," I said pointing to the picture. She stared at the photograph for a moment.

"No, that's grandpa, " she said.

"Yes, but *that's* your father," I said and I pointed to the blond boy. "He was eleven then, just like you," I said.

She looked at the photograph again but said nothing. Thinking she didn't understand, I added, "He's much older now," but she was still silent.

I thought to myself, *He's probably dead by now*, but I didn't say it out loud, even if it was probably true.

I saw a young father pick up his child and lift him over his head. The man's eyes half closed like he was making love or something. It was almost orgasmic, and his whole body shuddered. You could see it and he let out a sigh. Then he lowered the boy to his face and kissed him on the forehead. The child made a gurgle and the father pressed him against his own face. He was a gold miner coming home from the mines. I don't think he ever saw his child before that. Not until then.

— Captain of the Haley's Comet, a passenger boat , somewhere on the Amazon River

My oldest daughter, she hung out with the wrong crowd. They got her hooked on drugs, smoking marijuana mostly. I tried to stop it, but how could I? Working all day, running home, washing clothes at night, fixing food for the two kids. My youngest was only four when I worked in the Alvorado Bar, a really bad place. I hired maids to care for the kids but they stole me blind. I took my daughter to a social worker, tried to get her off drugs, but it was too late. They failed and finally she went into the streets — if you know what I mean — they stuck her with needles. God how I suffered. Finally, she died.

— Loura, a woman on Commerce Street, Manaus

I sat down next to a boy lying on the stone doorstep of the Cathedral in Manaus. His hands, feet and face were black, like he'd been in a pile of coal. His clothes stank of sweat and piss and filth. His eyes were dreamy, almost empty. He stared up at me and opened his mouth but nothing came out. I could tell he didn't see me . I don't know what he saw, but he didn't see me. He had a dead look in his eyes like he was weak and hungry. But his body didn't look hungry. It looked battered.

I photographed his face. Then his hands. Then his bare dirty feet. I dissected him one click at a time and he didn't move. He let me take him the way I wanted to take him. Completely and without feeling, without emotion.

A man walked by with three teenagers and stopped. They looked down at me. Suddenly. I felt like an *uburu'*, a kind of vulture, that swoops down and picks at the corpses of dead animals along the road. When you drive by, they stop pecking, and get ready to fly away. I couldn't fly away, so I stopped photographing and looked up.

"He's on glue," said the man.

"Glue?" I asked.

"They sniff it until they can't stand up. That's how they escape," he said.

"Oh, I thought he was hungry," I said. I felt ashamed of what I did, so I moved away.

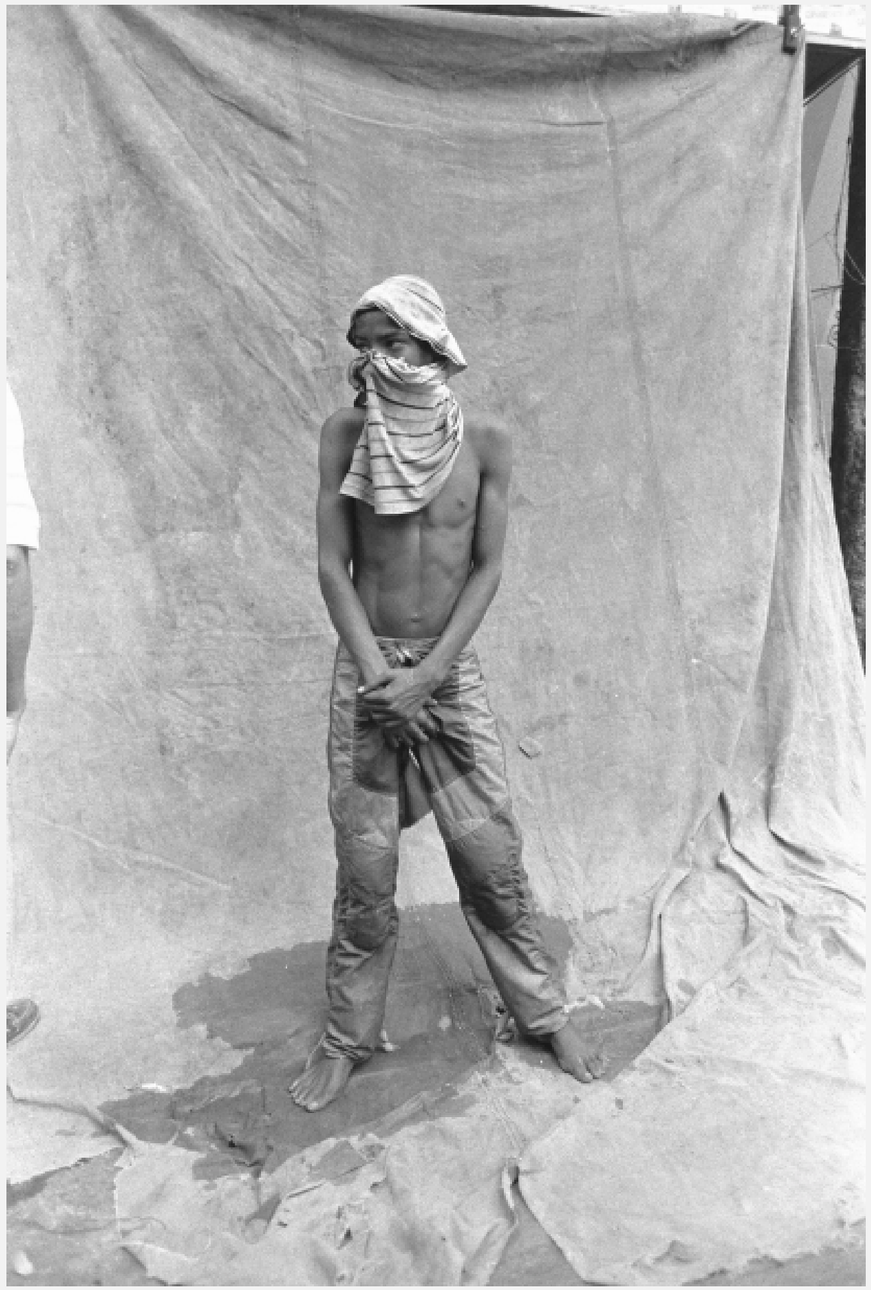
— Diary entry, Manaus 1990

Schools don't work here, not like you think. Can you imagine putting your five or six kids in a dugout canoe during the rainy season, everyday, to go three or four kilometers by water to school with all the dangers it brings?

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, Mutum, Rondonia

Politicians are all the same— beija-beija, chow chow — *kiss-kiss, bye-bye.*

— Young man talking about the Brazilian government, Humaita'.



I know Padre Bento. He's a good man but his hard work won't make a dent. There are too many kids and it only gets worse. In my day we knew the value of work. I had eighteen kids. They all worked. So, it was okay for me to be hung like a horse. But today the only thing people do is have kids. No one wants to work.

— A colonist crossing the Madeira River by barge, Porto Velho, Rondonia

I don't want to become a criminal. I don't want to end up dead.

— Teenager, Porto Velho, Rondonia