



## RIVERS OF GOLD

*When I reached the river, I got scared. The place was full of desperate looking men. They stared at me. I felt out of place and my camera made me feel like a target. The air was full of black flies the stench of rotting garbage and dead fish. Ghetto-blasters were everywhere, and they all had different music playing. Taxis were crammed together along the dirt road that disappeared into the brown river. Large diesel trucks were coming and going, unloading food, beer, and equipment. Men stood around stripped to the waist, sweating. They had guns, and they looked like they'd kill me.*

— The author, diary excerpt



Carlos Augusto Nogueira Tosta was looking for work. The week before he had been ambushed by Bolivian soldiers while mining gold across the border and lost everything he had. He said he was broke and needed to get back to the Prainha gold mine eighty miles up the Madeira river. I didn't want to go to the gold mines alone. The miners have guns just like the Bolivians and I didn't know how to deal with this, so I hired him to be my guide. I figured if he'd survived a massacre in a Bolivian gold mine he would know how to get around on the Madeira river.

He told me he didn't want my money. He said he just needed a bus ticket to the Prainha mine and that once he got there, the gold dredge owners would take care of everything, even his cigarettes. So I told him I'd pay his way and buy him beers if he'd show me around. He said OK and we headed for the Prainha mine eighty miles up the Madeira river. We took a taxi. The bus was cheaper but not faster, so we took a taxi eighty miles to the gold mine.

When we got there I followed Carlos down to the river. It was brown and smelled like gasoline. There was a dozen or more wooden barges crammed along the banks of the river. We made our way to a one which was a floating restaurant and bar moored next to a floating gas-station. It was tied to the shore with steel cables and we had to walk quickly up a gangplank to get on the barge. The board was thin and narrow and it sprang up and down when Carlos stepped on it. Garbage, rotting fish, and excrement oozed in the mud just below his feet. When I stepped onto the plank, I was filled with a feeling of imbalance and fear. I couldn't get rid of the feeling after that. Not until I got out of there and back to Porto Velho.

We sat and drank some beer. Music blared from a tape deck behind the bar. There were a few miners drinking at the table next to ours. They stared at me like they were thinking I was going to steal something. One of them came over and asked right out if America had queers and drag queens.

"Of course," I said.

"How many?" He asked.

"How the hell would I know?" I said.

He made an obscene gesture at me and went back to his table. Carlos told me to ignore it and he ordered another beer. I lit up a cigar and looked out over the river. There were plenty of yellow river

taxis zooming back and forth. I could have hired one of them, but I was waiting for someone, anyone who would take us up-river for free. It's not that I didn't want to pay. I just didn't want to show any money. I was afraid they'd rob me.

Finally, a guy showed up, a little man. He said his name was Domingo, that he was a gold dredge foreman and that he had come down-river to buy supplies. Without asking, he sat down at our table. It was blue and round, made of metal. It vibrated from the diesel engine running all the time in the back. That's how they make electricity. We had to keep putting our beer bottles back toward the center of the table because the vibrations made them jitter toward the edge. Domingo didn't pay attention and his bottle vibrated off the table and broke. I bought him another beer. They cost five bucks each out there on the river. Or a half gram of gold. I didn't have any gold so they took my money.

Domingo grinned and gave me a thumbs up sign. He was already drunk but he kept ordering beers until our table was rattling with bottles. After an hour or so, he stood up. The sun was setting and the river was all pink and blue and purple. It was lined with thousands of twinkling lights, the lights of the gold dredges strung up and down the river.

"C'mon with me," he said. So we went with him in his river taxi. It's called a *voadeira*, or flying boat because they zoom across the rivers at high speeds and hit rocks or logs or each other and kill miners in the dark. They're long and metal, very fast, very dangerous.

He took us to one of the floating whore houses a few miles down-river. You see, the whores get in these barges and float up and down the river. Everything's in the river. Everything is a barge of some kind. The general store, the bar, the whore house, the machine shop, the food store, the taverns. They're all connected, a regular Venice in the middle of the Amazon.

Carlos and I sat at a table, ordered another beer and watched the whores. Domingo said he'd be right back and then disappeared with one of them in tow. He was gone over an hour and it was already dark on the river. I got scared. I didn't know where I was or how to get back.

"Don't worry," said Carlos. "If he doesn't show up soon, we'll steal his *voadeira* and make it back alone."



You steal anything on this river and they find you and kill you. I didn't want to steal his *voadeira*, so I ordered another round of beer.

Finally, Domingo showed up. This time with a different woman. She was twice his size and fat. No matter where on her he tried, he couldn't get his arm around her. He pulled a Polaroid snapshot out from under his T-shirt. It was her, dressed in nothing but a towel.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" He whispered. He said it more than asked it. I nodded. She was fat and ugly, but he was lonely. He started dancing with her, but we pulled him away, got back into the *voadeira* and sped off into the dark. He pulled the photograph out, smelled it, gave it a big kiss, grinned and made a thumbs-up sign again. "I'm in love!" He said, and he gunned it. The *voadeira's* pointed bow raised out of the water and we plunged into the inky darkness up-river toward the twinkling lights of the gold dredges.



***T**here's over 5000 dredges and barges on the Madeira. That's at least 50,000 men shitting and pissing into the river. The river is full of it, and garbage and oil and mercury. Mostly, it's full of gold, gold mixed with shit and piss but we don't care.*

*— Euclides Aparecido “Credola” Cardoso,  
Gold Dredge Foreman, Madeira River*





*They name the mines after someone or something that happened. There's Simonzinho, (Little Simon), Tombetas (Falling Over), Paredao (Steep Banks), Vai-Quem-Quer (Go-Whoever-Wants), Machado (Machete), Palmerao (Great Palm), Caldeirao (Pothole), Fofoca do Trinta (Thirty Gossipers), Penha (Pity), Praia Durao (Beach of Pain), Taquara (Bamboo), Arara (Nincompoop), Chocolatao (Chocolate Bar), Praia-do-Aviao (Airplane Beach), Buracao-da-Dor (Hole of Pain), and Prainha (Little Beach). That's where I'm going, 'cause I hear the gold is flowing there.*

— Carlos Augusto Nogueira Tosta,  
Gold Miner from Sao Paulo



*I bought my first dredge two years ago for about sixty grand American. Within five months I pulled eleven kilos of gold out of the Madeira River. Then I bought another and pulled out six kilos in three months. So I bought two more dredges. That's when the gold was good. Now, the gold is down. Between all four dredges I'm only pulling two kilos a month out and it costs more than that to run the whole operation. I'm losing money.*

— Gold Dredge Owner, Porto Velho



*H*old on, let's do some math. First, the peons have no risks and no expenses. We pay for everything. Right down to their cigarettes. And medicine, too. If they get sick, they still get their share. So, the guy who pulls out 45 grams of gold gives 5% of it to each peon. That's just over two grams, or about fifteen dollars American. In a month, that figures to \$450.00 pure profit. The minimum wage in Brazil is less than \$600 a year. So a peon can make a lot of money, even when the gold is down. On a good day, he can make a hundred dollars or more.

— Owner of six gold dredges on the Madeira River, from Santa Catarina



*Then there are the balsas which are like small dredges except there are men attached to big vacuum hoses that suck up the mud on the bottom. They go down, sometimes fifty feet, and they stay there for three or four hours at a time. They breathe through a rubber hose with a compressor attached to the other end. Sometimes the guy running the compressor falls asleep, the compressor runs out of gas, and the poor sonofabitch on the bottom dies. It happens more than you think.*

*— Nelson Dionizio, Known as The Paulista,  
owner of Dredge Manufacturing Company,  
Porto Velho*





*O*ur draga is one of the best on the river. I like working here because we have a cook and sleeping quarters. But you don't get much sleep because the damn noise from the deisel keeps you up. It never stops. We go up and down the river and tear up the bottom, then suck up ore and separate the gold out with mercury. I think the way we mine is very primitive. Probably less than twenty percent of the gold that's pulled out of the river ends up in anyone's pockets. The rest of it goes back into the water.

— Euclides Aparecido “Credola” Cardoso,  
Foreman of gold dredge, Madeira River

*L*ast week one of the drill-heads got a balsa diver. You can't see them down there on the bottom it's so muddy. It tore his arm off and sucked it right up. What a mess. They never found him, so he must have drowned.

— Paulo Sodas Nogueira,  
body guard on a gold dredge





*I t's boring as hell here. All we do is work. That, and drink. There's no gambling on the river. It causes too many fights and guys get shot. Thank God there's whores, even though they're mostly fat and ugly. But a woman is a woman and I'd go crazy here without them.*

— Anonymous gold miner,  
Madeira River near Bolivia



*I drink eight or nine litres of water a day, not counting beer, and I don't piss. The heat's going to kill me one of these days.*

— Euclides Aparecido Cardoso,  
Prainha Mine on the Madeira River



*It's like the gold rush in California. You had pioneers looking for a new life in the West. People grabbed land, then they were pushed into desperation because crops failed, farms failed, and in the end you had thousands of settlers that had no-where to go, who didn't know what to do with themselves. Look around you, it's the same here, too, only worse. The Amazon is full of violence, poverty, hunger, disease and rugged men who are out there just to find gold and strike it rich. But they're destroying the land doing it.*

—Jose Renato Heiss, Pilot  
from Itaituba flying gold miners  
and supplies in and out of the jungle



*I heard that babies are being born without eyes and stuff because of the mercury they dump into the river. The river people eat the fish and they're full of poison. So, if you're ever in a restaurant near a river, especially the Madeira, don't eat fish because you'll die or go crazy or something.*

— Anonymous gold miner,  
Hole-of-Pain Mine, Madeira River



*Whenever anyone finds gold, all the other dredges hear about it because the peons get drunk and can't keep their mouths shut. They tell the whores and the whores tell everyone. They get bigger tips that way. Before you know it, everyone on the river knows about the gold. They call it a fofoca — gossip. So everyone floats their dredge to the fofoca and they try their luck at it. There are no secrets on the river. It's because everyone knows there's enough gold to go around.*

— Eurivaldo Soares de Andrade, young gold miner,  
Prainha Gold Mine on the Madeira River, Rondonia



*“They say there is more gold in the Madeira River than water.”  
— Anonymous Gold Miner*

