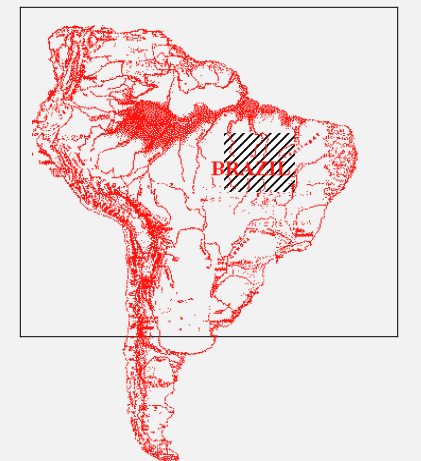

MOTHERLODE

***W**e could have built Brazil three times
over with the gold that came out of the
Serra Pelada.*

*— Anonymous gold miner,
Serra Pelada gold mine*



I drove to the Serra Pelada, the greatest gold mine in Brazil, with a preacher from Marabá. He wanted to see the mine but didn't want to go there alone and I needed a four-wheel jeep to get there. He had a one, so we went together.

Driving through the jungle at night is like speeding down a dark tunnel full of flying insects with only a flashlight. You can't see anything except splattered bugs on the windshield and maybe thirty feet in front of you. It hypnotizes you. I've heard of guys driving like that and ramming into a tree at full speed. They never knew what hit them. It happens too fast. It's all darkness and holes in the road and no lights anywhere on the side. It was like that, dark and fast and hard on the nerves.

Three hours into the trip, our headlights caught something in the middle of the road. The preacher swerved and just missed it. At first, I thought it was a dead jaguar or an anta, but it was a body, a man lying in the road. The preacher slammed on the brakes, and then started to go back.

"Keep driving," I said.

The preacher said he wanted to stop, to help the guy.

"No," I told him. "He's either dead, or sleeping," I said. "If he's dead, you can't help him. If he's sleeping, he deserves to die. If he's not already dead or sleeping, then he's waiting."

"Waiting for what?" the preacher asked.

"For some dumb sonofabitch like you or me to stop so he can pull a gun on us, blow our heads off and steal the jeep. So, leave him."

The preacher mumbled something and put the jeep into first, and we drove on in the inky blackness. The trees were so thick above us they blotted out the stars.

We got to the turnoff to the mine at midnight. There was a cluster of small buildings that serve as a tavern, a bus stop, a machine shop, and a truck stop. The whole thing was lit overhead by a single streetlight lit by a diesel generator. It was the first street light we saw in four hours driving through the jungle, and the only marker for the intersection. If the diesel engine was off, we'd have driven right past the place. The preacher turned off and drove toward the tavern. We passed a row of wooden shacks, each with a number on the door.

"When the Serra Pelada was booming, there were plenty of women around. Those shacks were the whore houses. They're empty now," I said. "When the gold runs out, so do the whores." I knew the preacher didn't like it when I talked like that, but I was too tired to care.

He parked the jeep and we went into the bar. I ordered a whisky, but there wasn't any, so I drank a beer.



The preacher ordered a Coca-Cola.

It was another fifty miles to the mine and the road was dangerous. Full of holes and deep mud and running through hilly terrain. We decided to wait until daylight to go on.

"Where can we sleep?" I asked the man behind the counter. He sent a boy to fetch the night guard. We waited ten minutes. The guard came with his gun. He looked aggravated.

"How much?" I asked.

"Thirty cruzados," he said.

I took out the money and gave it to him. He looked at the money then at me.

"Each," he said.

I paid him another thirty and he took us back up the road to the row of shacks. He banged on door number one and a man dressed only in green shorts appeared. They talked under their breath so I wouldn't hear, but I

knew what they were saying. The guard gave him thirty cruzados and then the man in the green shorts took us down toward the end of the row of shacks. He stopped at Number 12. He unlocked it and pushed it open. A powerful odor hit me in the face. It smelled like men and sweat and spent passions.

"Twenty cruzados," he said and he lit two or three candles and placed them on a small table between two beds. "For the candles," he added without turning around.

I paid him and he disappeared into the dark. The preacher sat on the bed and started to take off his boots.

"Leave them on," I said. "And your clothes. Sleep in your clothes and don't put the sheet over you. Lay on top of the bed."

"Why?" he asked.

"This was a whore house," I said. "It's infested with God-knows what. Don't undress. It's dangerous here. We may have to get out of here fast."

"What about the jeep? Is it safe?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Will someone steal it?" he asked.

"Don't worry," I said. "If they try, we'll know who it was in the morning."

"How will you know that?" he asked.

"I paid the guard fifty cruzados," I said. "To shoot anyone who came near the jeep. I told him I'd give him fifty more in the morning if the jeep was still there, and if he killed whoever tried to steal it, I promised another hundred on top of that."

The preacher didn't like that. He said that would be murder and he wanted no part of it.

"Shut up and go to sleep," I said and blew out the candles.



When I came here I saw many people getting gold, pretty gold, no? So I went here. You see, I had two meters square. Every miner gets only two meters square of land to dig. We dig very, very deep, maybe to China, but never bigger than two meters square.

—*Juvenal Mauro da Silva,*
gold miner

When the gold was good, there was over 15,000 claims being dug here, all next to each other, lined up in squares. Some were deeper than others, but every one of them was no wider than the deight of a man.

—*Anonymous miner,*
Serra Pelada





VIEW OF MINE AT LUNCH BREAK GOLD 05-195-10 153%



We work all day and try to give something back while the thieves in the government steal everything and give nothing.

— *Anonymous gold miner
Serra Pelada*



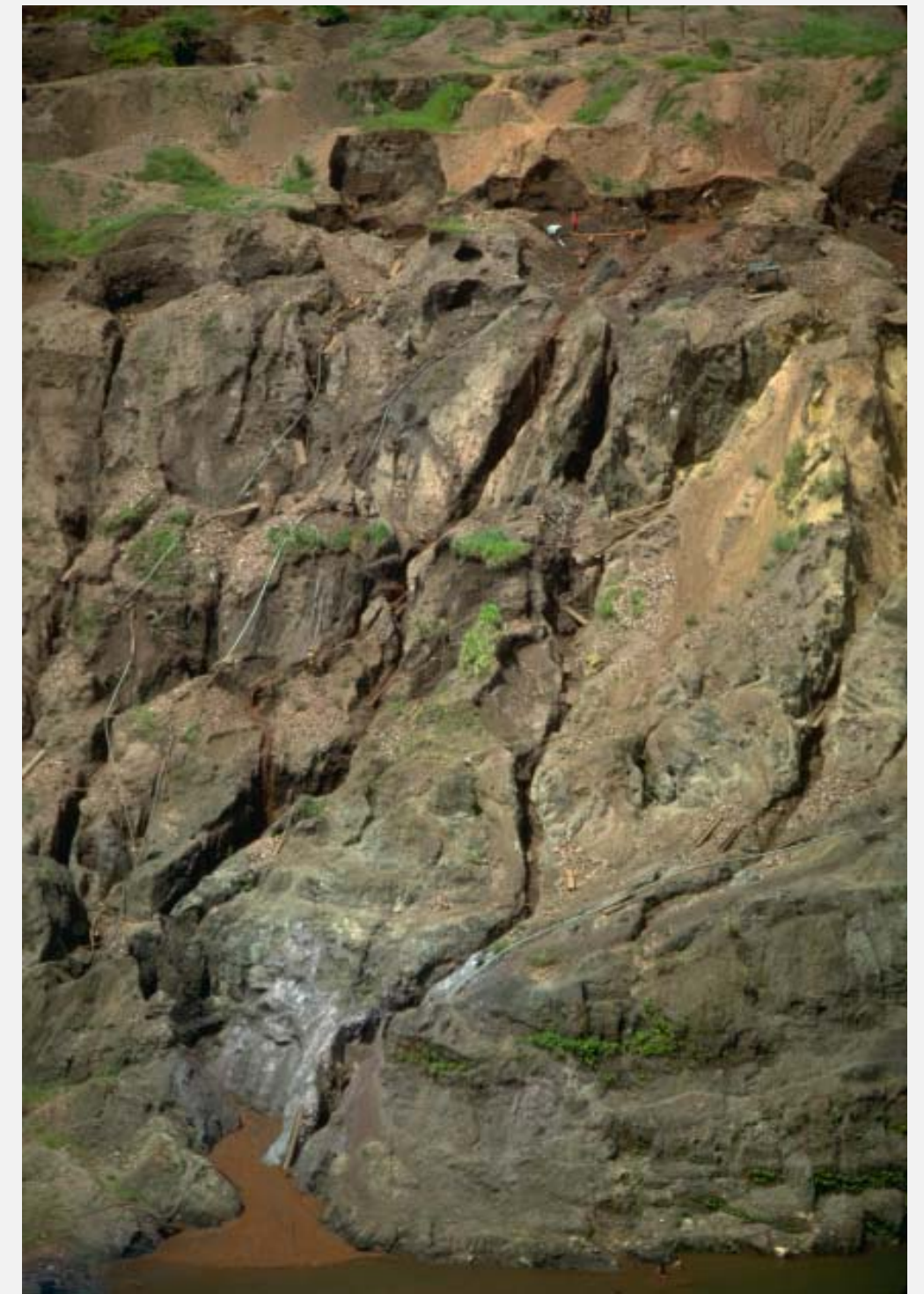


Once there were over 100,000 miners in this hole. Right now we got only five thousand working here. The miners stay away because we don't have food from the government. They will come back when this problem is solved and the government gives us food. Then we have to move this mountain.

— Juvenal Mauro da Silva, gold miner, Serra Pelada

See that mountain? We put it there. One sack at a time. Those are the tailings from the mine and they say there's over fifty tons of gold in the rock we threw away.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Serra Pelada





There are Formigas, the peons who climb the ladders. Then there are Diggers, Carriers, and Owners. We even have our own Prophet. He doesn't dig or carry, but he's good luck to have around. We are many kinds of men, but we are all equal in the hole. We are all Garimpeiros.

— Antonio Grunupp, known as
The Prophet, Serra Pelada

There are no women here, only pornographic magazines. That guy makes a fortune. The miners have only two things on their minds: gold and women. There's plenty of gold here, but no women to speak of. It gets very lonely.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Serra Pelada





Russian and Japanese satellites told us that we got 300,000 tons of gold only 17 kilometers straight down the valley East of here. That is why the government won't help us. They want to steal it.

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



I dug and dug for months until I was down more than forty feet. Then I found gold. It was a big chunk but most of it was buried in the claim next to mine, so I couldn't get to it. You can dig as deep as you want, but never beyond your two square meters worth. When the guy who owned the claim next to mine came, I made him pay a lot of money to dig his gold from my side. If he didn't pay me, he would have had to dig from on top. Why should I do all the work so he can get rich?

— *Anonymous miner, Serra Pelada,*
on the rules of digging a claim.



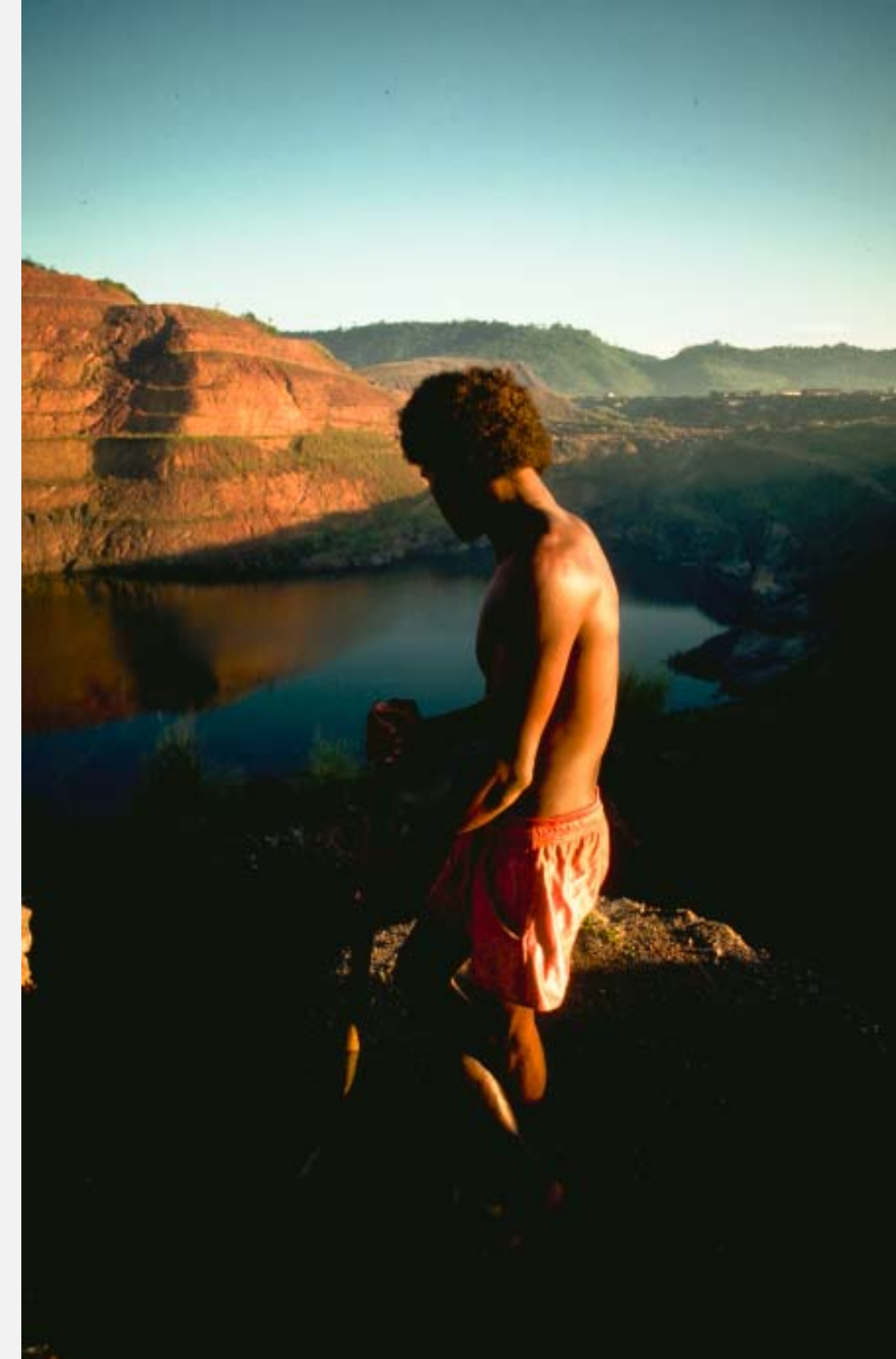
I leave my house each day on time
 Forced by hunger to dig
 I'm trying my luck in the mine
 Respecting the small and the big.

I work with the rich man and the bum,
 Taking care to mine the wall
 Never crossing the owners
 Or the bosses who make the law.

Finding gold is my only goal
 'Cause I'm a miner who's poor
 I shovel all day in the deepest hole
 And I'm always looking for more.


I sweat in the midst of the multitude
 Working for just one thing:
 To get my card and be legal
 The card that only gold can bring.

— Verse from an anonymous
 story-teller, Serra Pelada gold mine



In 1979, when the people started prospecting gold here we got 112 tons of gold in one year. That was when there were 200,000 miners in the hole. These days the gold is down and we are only 5,000 men not counting the children.

— Juvenal Mauro da Silva, gold miner, Serra Pelada



We can't drink any alcohol here. And no guns. The Federal Police make sure of that. You've got to have papers to get in here alive. But you don't need any to get out dead.

— *Anonymous gold miner,
Serra Pelada*