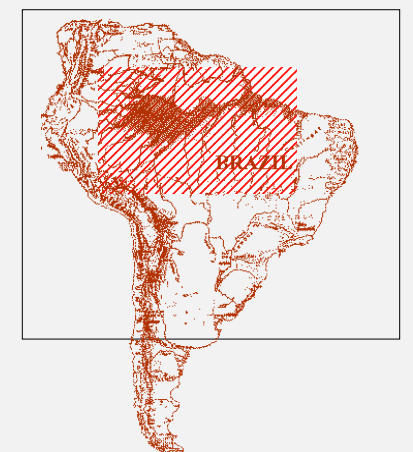




The Goldminer

The true hero of the Amazon is the gold miner. He's the one who has risked everything to take possession of the land.

— Elton Rohnelt, Entrepreneur
owner of Goldmazon Mining Company



Carlos crossed over the Guapore River to Bolivia with his brother, his brother-in-law and three other men. Between them, they carried seven hundred pounds of gold mining equipment on their backs into the Bolivian jungle somewhere south of Guajara Mirim. A six day journey by foot. They made a deal with the Bolivian Army: if they were allowed to dig gold without interference from the Bolivians, they'd give ten percent of the gold over to the soldiers. The soldiers said okay, so Carlos and the others began to dig.

They dug until the hole got to be fifty feet square and ten feet deep. That's when they struck gold. A lot of gold. They celebrated that night and drank whatever whisky they had until they all fell asleep.

In the middle of the night the Bolivians came with guns and began shooting. Carlos escaped, but the last thing he saw was his brother running naked into the jungle.

"I was lucky," he said. "I got up to go to the bathroom and had my boots and pants on. That's when they came, when they started shooting. That's when I got out. I left everything I owned back there. I have nothing now. My brother, I don't think he made it out of the jungle. Not naked. Not without boots.

"I don't know what to do now. I got a wife and kid in the south. I haven't seen my boy in a long time. I called him today to wish him a happy birthday. He's sixteen. He told me he quit school today, being legal, and I got mad. He told me to mind my own business. He showed no respect. If I had any money, I'd go home and whip some sense into him.

"He's living with my parents. My dad's a saint. Closest thing to God I ever knew. I asked him, '*What's with the boy?*' He said he was a good boy, he said that he's just revolting like kids do. He wants to get ahead fast. He's like all the kids. They see those fancy things on the TV and they want them. So they drop out of school looking for quick money and end up in the gutter."

He fell silent for a moment.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "I'm sick over it. I lost all my money, my equipment, maybe my brother and now my son. I've lost his respect. I'm at the edge of despair over it. I even went to a church today. I wanted to find the old priest and scream or cry or something. Anything, just to get it off my chest. I don't want to go home and be a failure. I gotta get back to the gold mines and make some money or I'll starve to death."

"I want to go back to the mines. I gotta go back. But first, I want to get drunk," he said and ordered another beer.





They found a guy who'd struck it rich in the gold mines running down the street pulling a long string behind him. He had thousands of cruzados tied to the string in 100 cruzados notes. When asked what he was doing, he said, "All my life I ran after money. Now it's time money ran after me!"

— Story told by a gold miner in the Serra Pelada Mines



*So when the money is gone
I know where to find more.
It's in the gold mines of the Serra
The Serra has gold galore.*

*The Serra has brought wealth
to many a jerk,
The only ones who don't get rich
Are the ones who don't work.*

*— Verse from anonymous
storyteller, Serra Pelada gold mine*



You gotta have a nickname, a name no one will forget. That's very important here. There's a rancher on the Madeira River known as John-Eats-'em-Alive. They call him that because he tore a man's ear off and ate it.

— Taxicab driver on his way to the gold mines of the Madeira River



You can't be a criminal and survive the Amazon. You have to be serious, strong and honest. You have to know when to let Nature have Her way.

— Elton Rohnelt, Owner of Goldmazon Mining Company



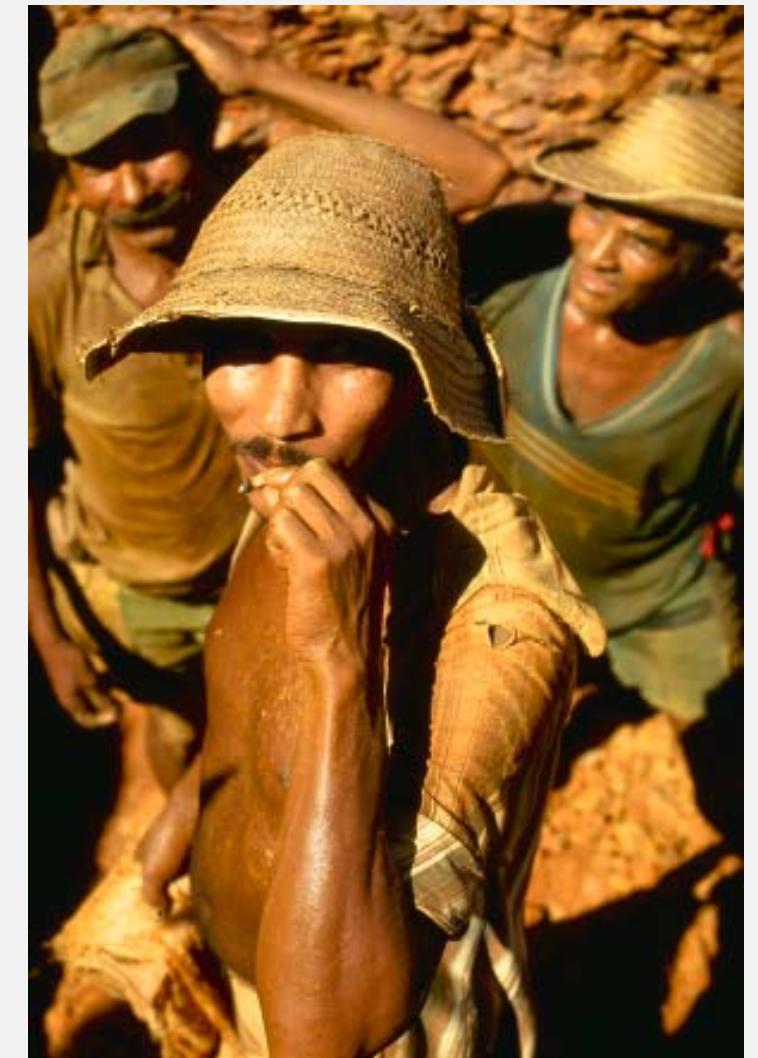
*G*arimpeiros work like dogs in this sun. I don't know how they do it. The younger ones are strong. They can take it. But the older men, men my age, the heat and the work will kill them. Or just make them older before their time. But they don't care. They can only think of getting rich. But what good is it to be rich if you're dead?

— Padre Adolfo Rolh,
(Padre Moses) Missionary, Humaita'



*W*hen I start drinking, I don't stop.

— Commandante Rogerio “Maconha”
Prunes de Abreu, pilot & goldminer



*G*arimpeiros are a bad influence. The garimpeiro doesn't value much except what's in his own pocket.

— Padre Adolfo Rolh,
(Padre Moses) Missionary, Humaita'



The jungle is so big. The mosquitoes are so small. Both are killing us.

— Anonymous miner, Paapiu, Roraima



Gold is the Mother of whores. She's the begetters of bastards, the maker of orphans, the creator of widows, the destroyer of the land, the defiler of all that She touches.

She's a killer, the messenger of greed, violence and death. The beginning and end of greed, She sets the trap and men fall into the pit. She's Fortune's foe. She is the great Seducer, the temptress, the harlot of the forest, and men run after Her.

Ahead of Her goes the shining countenance of wealth, the joyful face of hope, the desirable call to happiness.

Behind her comes greed, lust, lying, cheating, murder, violence, destruction, strife, lying, adultery, pride, idolatry, hunger and loss.

Nothing good can come from seeking Her, For where gold is, madness follows.

— The Prophet, Antonio Grunupp,
The Serra Pelada Gold Mine



“I’m sixty-four but never too old to screw,” he said and blew smoke out of his large nostrils. He brushed his hair back and tapped at his forehead.

“It’s mostly metal in here. From my crash in Mato Grosso. I flew the damn plane right into the river bank. It was an amphibian. I lost one of the floats flying. Must have hit a tree on the way out. So there I was, half bird, half fish. I couldn’t land on water and I couldn’t land on land. So, I tried to land on the margin of the river : half water, half land. A slight miscalculation. That’s all. Very small. But the damage was great. Destroyed the plane. My copilot died. Got crushed to death. I went through the windshield. Broke both my legs, smashed up my head and internal stuff. I was lucky. It was the only time in my life I didn’t have my seat belt on. My star shines. God, how my star shines.”

“Once, I got hired by a guy up in Columbia to run contraband cargo back and forth from Manaus to Bogota. He had a storehouse full of stuff, including a pile of corrugated iron. So, I found a guy in Manaus that needed corrugated iron. He promised me thirty thousand dollars for a shipment of the stuff. He had plans to sell it to the government for a big profit. Well, I paid this guy in Columbia fifteen thousand cash for his pile of corrugated iron. When I delivered it to the guy in Manaus he backed off and told me he only had ten thousand. Knew I couldn’t go back to Columbia with the stuff being illegal and all, so he tried to screw me. No one screws me. I told him to drop dead. Then I took the plane up over the poorest part of town and threw all the iron out the door, one sheet at a time. You should have seen the poor running back and forth down there trying to get the stuff. Instant roofing from heaven. They thought it was a miracle.”

He smiled, puffed on his Camel again, rubbed his beer belly and turned up the volume of the tape recorder. Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto. He filled a shot glass full of whiskey and held it up to the light, like he was inspecting a diamond.

“For the *garimpo*, the gold mines, only the airplane worked. But in time, they built roads and brought in trucks. That’s when it loses interest for me. That’s when I leave, when it’s not interesting. So, I went to the Tapajos. After that I went to Porto Velho. I’m always first. But in a short time, two hundred airplanes, then three hundred. Unbelievable. So I left and went to Amapa’. Sure enough, that damned mining company Paranapanema showed up, made roads and once again I

got the hell out. I went back to the Tapajos River. That’s where I met Elton Rohnelt. We made plans, big plans and then went to the Alto Rio Negro.

We stayed there two years. Cleaned up the place. There was a lot of gold, a lot of Colombians, too. They wanted the gold, but we had more guns. More guts. They ran after they figured we weren’t leaving without the gold. Besides, it was on our side of the border. They had no right to it, the bastards.

After that, I came here, to Roraima. I was the first one here, too. I called Elton. That was in 1986. The rest is history. I had my own mining operation. Tin. Five hundred thousand hectares, practically right where everyone’s mining now. In the Surucucu’, near the Parima River, in the Valley of Ua-wa-wari. But during the dictatorship in 1972 they kicked me out and made the whole thing a National Park. I lost my claim. Afterwards, they sold it to Shell Oil, who pulled out eight hundred tons of tin. I got nothing. But don’t worry. I’ll take care of myself because I don’t quit, dammit, I’m Rogerio Prunes de Abreu.”



Rogerio Prunes de Abreu



It’s a mentality. They find gold. They have a lot of money. They have a good time. Then it’s gone. It’s an addiction. They don’t want money. Don’t believe them. They only want to mine gold. They’re miners, not investment bankers.

*– Padre Mario,
Missionary, Manicore’*

The only protection in the jungle is God. Without faith, you’ll never make it.

— The Preacher, Serra Pelada



I have eight sons. Six of them are garimpeiros – gold miners. I stay away from gold. It drives men mad.

— A Gaucho from Rio Grande do Sul drinking in a bar on the Madeira River, Humaita'



I'm getting out. I'd rather be poor and alive. All I want is four or five kilos, and then I'm going home. I'm going in, this time deep, to find another stake. I'll be going home with or without gold on December 15th. I can't go long without my family. My daughter is nine and studies piano. She's bright and I want to send her to the United States or Europe to a school to learn about computers.

— Anonymous Gold Miner on his way to the Serra Pelada, also known as The Devil's Pit.



I don't want to become a criminal. But I am afraid. If I don't find gold, I'll have to steal to stay alive.

— Young gold miner in the Serra Pelada mines



The gold miner is a man you can't trust. Don't trust him. Don't trust any gold miner. The only thing that is important to a gold miner is gold.

— Elton Rohnelt, Owner of Goldmazon Mining Company



The Amazon is very eclectic. We have Indian Gods and Xerox machines. But there's little room left for people like us. I love warriors. I'm a warrior and so is every gold miner in the Amazon. We're probably the last of the romantic adventurers.

— Elton Rohnelt, Owner of Goldmazon Mining Company, Manaus

