satiric and biting. In Brazil, we get less of the moan and howl. Instead, we get the grito de Carnaval. The cry of the release! But the emotion is always a pain that hurts good, the evocation of that indefinable longing inherited from the Portuguese through their favorite catchword, saudade. Call it homesickness, nostalgia for happier days, suffering over love lost and dreams squandered, and, ultimately, a confrontation with every man’s inherent state of solitude.

—John Krich, Why Is This Country Dancing?: A One-Man Samba to the Beat of Brazil

DIANE ACKERMAN

Where the Sun Dines

On an Amazon journey, every sense is opened and filled.

By early morning light, we set out in our Zodiaks, and soon we pass a woman sitting on a caustic-sapped log, açai, loosely translated as “that which burns the asshole,” to wash her clothes in the river in the ancient way, though she uses a 20th-century plastic scrub brush, which she has probably bought from one of the itinerant peddlers who travel up and down the river, selling salt (used for drying fish) and other staples and household goods. A praying mantis flutters into the boat. It is a small brown-and-white insect with protruding eyes, horns on its back, and long waving antennae in front. Its jagged poise is beautiful as it preens its long legs and makes slow and purposeful gestures. Fish leap from the water, fleeing predators. What a perfect getaway: hurl yourself straight into another dimension of reality, as flying fish do, and suddenly appear elsewhere and elsewhen. Three little girls row out in a bark canoe, flash hundred-watt grins, stand up suddenly, and jump into the water. One man on shore holds up a pair of binoculars and watches us, the exotic primitive tribe madly unfolding colored ponchos from their packs and squirming into them because rain has begun to fall like a wall of rubber. Children go on playing in the shallows; adults continue to swim, wash clothes, mend their boats and nets.
is only rain. This is a rainforest. Holes in the banks, carved by walking catfish in April or May, when the water level rises as much as 30 feet, make the mud look like a condominium of birdhouses. On some of the lighter trees you can see the dark waterline, and many trees have large, exposed root systems to grab nutrients directly from the seasonal flood.

In a tall, bushy-topped tree, a dozen hanging nests belong to oropendolas, birds that have a symbiotic relationship with a number of animals. They like to build their nests in trees where there are hornet nests so that the hornets, which attack parasitic bottlfies, will keep them from the chicks. The oropendolas also allow cowbirds to lay eggs in their nests so that the cowbird chicks, which are born with their eyes open, will eat bottlfies, too. The siren song of the oropendola is so complex and willowy that river people often build their houses under an oropendola-inhabited tree. The song begins with a wet, two-stage warble, a liquid undulating smooch, part throb, part Moog synthesizer, and ends with the sound of a debuta-tante throwing kisses underwater. *Birds of Colombia*, by Steven Hilty and William Brown, scans it as “EEE-ee-D’D’Clock-agooogoo,” but there is a mellow swoon in the final stages of the call that’s seductive and magical.

Behind the Zodiac, the wake makes a perfect whitewater butterfly, wings outstretched and outlined in spray. The 40-horsepower engine gnaws like a buzzsaw, and its blade cuts through the reflection of trees in the opaque brown water as we scout the shore for birds, mammals, unusual plants. Along the bank lie logs waiting for high water and their trip to the mills, when they will be laced together in a large raft. A gash of light splits the water about ten yards away, as if a window sash has been thrown open, and then a pink dolphin surfaces and dives back through its window. Oh! I say: like the dolphin, I take a small gasp of air. Suddenly four more pink dolphins are out of the water in front of us, and one surfaces right next to the boat with a small, explosive breath. Close to the ancestral whale, these dolphins and their platanistid relatives are frequenters of the Amazon, Ganges, Yangtze. On their snouts they have short, tactile whiskers to feel for food. At the riverbank a striated heron

stands with its back to the sun so it can hunt in its own shade. A brown sphinx moth with a bright orange body planes low at eye level, followed by a heron, floating pterodactyl-slow with long rippling neck: a stately white apparition. We spot a tassel-topped tree, *triplaris*, which has hollow stems inhabited by stinging ants whose venom feels like hot wires. Lianas drip from the trees, anchoring in so many places that it is hard to fathom where the vines begin and end. The brown river bubbles gently; fish leap up, mouths open. We hear the sound of a trigger cocking, then the low mournful call of a patoo, a bird that can mimic dead sticks. A sun bittern flashes the big false eyes of its wings. Trees, swaddled in leafy vines, look like the feathered feet of huge owls. A kingfisher sounds like a child’s rubber squeaky toy. It is early morning on the Amazon, and the birds sing their territorial anthems. They do not mean to be beautiful. They cannot help themselves. A capuchin (organ grinder) monkey moves through the top of a tree, sampling fruit and dropping what doesn’t appeal to it, like someone testing chocolate bonbons. The sound of fingers dragged across a rubber inner tube comes from a bird. When we drift near a fisherman and his son in a bark canoe, my companion David calls in Portuguese: “Good morning, sir. How’s it going? Catch much today?”

The man smiles, gestures to the bottom of the boat, where freshly caught fish lie in a pool of water. “Good morning,” he says. “The people would like to have a look at the fish, if that would be possible,” David asks in a respectful and polite subjunctive, on behalf of the collective desire of our boat, “the people,” as he puts it.
The man grins and maneuvers his tippy boat next to ours.

"You've done well this morning, eh? Ananã, peixe cascudo, curimataç, piranha. Would it be possible to see the bony-tongued fish there?"

The man lifts the long, glistening fish in his hands. How Himalayan his lined face looks, a reminder that he shares genes with Mongols and many other peoples.

"I'm obliged," David says, and opens the complex and fascinating mouth of the fish, whose tongue is a thin bone. Bony-tongued fish like to eat monkey feces and often wait under a tree where monkeys live. Then David picks up an armored catfish, which has a shovel nose, strange upside-down omegas for pupils, long sensory barbel appendages on its face, and beautiful black stripes. Next David takes a reddish piranha from the old man, opens up its stomach with a machete, and smears the contents onto his finger to reveal that it holds mainly fish scales. The piranha nips at other fish to feed. It is not by choice the voracious carnivore of gothic stories and monster movies; unless it is cut off from its usual food supply and is famished, as it might be in an isolated swamp or lake, it is happy enough nibbling scales from fish. David hands the fish back to the fisherman, who generously offers us some to take back with us, if we like.

"No, thank you. That is kind of you," David insists. "We are glad to look at them, and learn about the life of the river. But, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I know we'd enjoy seeing how you use your net to fish."

The man's face lights with the pride of shared craft, and he picks up the net as if it were a hemp skirt hung with lead weights, secures one end in his mouth, and tosses it in an arcing spiderweb over the water, then watches it sink down into the shallows where fish wait. There is wonderment in the shape the net takes through the air, its calm descent, how it vanishes into darkness. And the man watches our faces, smiles, drags the net back, and tosses it again and again. A small bird with a bright yellow belly like a dollop of lemon pudding perches on a branch and calls, Bem t'i vi! ("Good to see you"), its name in Portuguese. In English, the bird's name is onomatopoeic, too: Kiskadee!

Later, at a peddler's boat, we stop to chat. Inside there are stacks of bananas and bagel-shaped bread; large fillets of salted fish are drying on the roof, swarmed over by flies. He offers us the hospitality of his house, just up the hill, behind which there is a large lake; his wife shows us her turtles, parakeets, and two hives of African killer bees, which she keeps for honey (each hive is locked inside a log that opens and closes like a sea chest). Digging at the base of one of the manioc plants in a field, she exposes the root to show us its long white fingers. Painted on the front of her house are the words CASA FEEM DEUS. I ask her what feem means, and she looks puzzled, laughs, struggles to explain. After an awkward moment, we laugh, too. Feem is a contraction of the words fé (faith) and em (in). I have come from the wilds of North America to ask her what faith is, and I should not be surprised if she marvels at my question. Before we go, she notices how we admire a large green calabash hanging on a tree in her front yard. The only calabash on the tree, it is about the size and weight of a bowling ball and will be dried and carved to use as a bowl. When she offers it to us, we must accept. It is so generous of her; it would be rude to refuse.

Back on the river, we see a large pod of pink dolphins, so we cut our motor and drift right into the center of it. With a snuffle and snort, the dolphins breathe through blowholes as they surface. What a range of pinks—some look like erasers, others are luminous or
Where the Sun Dines

tree? I wonder. It is hard to tell the age of a jungle tree because they don't lay down one ring a year. In areas that flood, like this one, many trees have flying buttresses and sprawling, shallow root systems to clutch at the ground. This is not a temperate forest, where sunlight is plentiful, the loam thick and rich, and predictable trees have predictable needs. As we float down the river, we occasionally smell smoke in the air. Though we are miles away from the sites, we are smelling the devastation of the rainforest, smelling the burning of huge tracts of forest. If the destruction continues at its current pace, all of the rainforest will disappear forever in about 40 years. Mining projects, rubber plantations, massive ill-fated cattle-growing projects, hydroelectric dams, highways, and an attempt to burn and dominate the land just because it is frontier and human beings can't abide an unowned space—all have contributed to the destruction of entire ecosystems. Species are going extinct in the rainforest that have not even been named yet. As Iain points out, "We are probably the last generation to have the opportunity to conserve the species of the Amazon forest... Today we stand at the brink of disaster in Amazonia...a mass extinction of species—one even greater than when the world lost its dinosaurs."

As the day fades, we return to our Zoís and start back down the river, which smells different in the evening. In the morning the oxygen is low and the air lightly perfumed. But in the evening, the air sizzles with oxygen and smells of sedge and damp amber. Pink auroras gush across the sky as darkness falls. With a lantern aimed low at the shore, we search for the eyes of caimans, Amazonian relatives of alligators. To get their attention, we make a mating or juvenile distress call, a syncopated grunting: *Uhn! Uhn! Uhn!* Then we float quietly and wait. To see nature you must be willing to cut the motor and drift, to follow wherever the current leads. But this is tough for goal-oriented people. Some people in my boat chat compulsively, polluting the silent grandeur of the forest. At first I thought they were ignoring the wild, rich sounds of bird, leaf fall, river, animal, and the august silence, but in time I began to think that it might be the opposite. Talk makes such small shapes in the teeming wilderness of Nature, small shapes in the formless clamor

dusky. We are close enough to be able to recognize individuals. I lean over the side of the boat and put my head in the water to listen for the rapid clicks of their sonar. *Whoosh! Whew!* They blow as they surface. In pairs and threes they gallop through the river. When the rain starts, we head for shore and climb up a bank to a house on stilts. Inside there are shards of American culture: a Mickey Mouse towel, a photo of Lassie, six light bulbs for when the house gets electricity, magically shiny pots and pans (one, with a funnel center, looks like an angel-cake pan). The man who lives there pulls out two long benches, the way one puts an extra leaf in the table when company arrives, and invites us to sit. It is simply assumed that we are welcome and may hang up our hammocks in his house if we wish to.

Instead, when the rain stops, we stroll through his backyard and see a mother sloth cradling her baby up in a tree. About once a week, the sloth climbs down the tree, digs a pit, and defecates into it. This exposes the sloth to predators, but by putting its feces at the base of the tree, not dropping them at random, it invests in the future of its home. Algae live in its fur, which gives it a greenish tint. Moths live there too, as well as beetles and ticks. For long months, I stand and watch the mother sloth, who is completely immobile until, struck by a ravishing thought, she gently lifts her head.

When the other Zoís have joined up with ours, our guide Iain leads us through the rainforest he knows so well. There is much to see: the pau roxo (*Peltogyne*) tree from whose deep purple wood beautiful bowls are made; the lyre-shaped leaf of *dioscorea*, a vine used as raw material for birth-control medicine because it mimics estrogen; a young kapok tree covered in sharp gooseflesh spines so that rodents can't climb or woodpeckers peck. At first, it seems such a tree must have bounty overflowing that it needs to protect, but perhaps not—there were Renaissance fortress cities supremely well protected, but not because they contained more treasures than other towns. The botanists test trees by making a small slash, looking for latex, noticing the smell, the stigmata of the cambium, a certain readable oozing. As Iain makes a tiny slash in the bark of a strangler fig, white latex tears well up. How old is that
of the universe, but they are shapes for those who need them. They are planks to the shore. “Sshh. Listen,” someone says gently, and everyone quiets down for a few minutes, letting the sounds of night wash over them. The steady beat of a frog sounds like someone rubbing a taut balloon. “Cornisha,” a bird called coruja calls, a samba in the word. The shore flashes with fireflies, and then a click beetle with two headlights flies over the boat. Our flashlight is reflected in the small revolving campfires of an owl’s eyes. At night, there are many mysterious, coal-burning eyes. The reason they seem to shine so eerily is that just behind the retina of nocturnal animals there is a reflective membrane called the tapetum, which helps these creatures see in the dark. Light bounces off its shiny surface. These live, burning embers in the forest remind us that we are burning, too, from the distant chaos of the sun. An osprey catches a fish and then tilts its beak up so it will be more streamlined when it flies. Cormorants feed near the shore; each has a sort of mousetrap in its throat, the better to stalk fish underwater. Terns swoop down in front of us, gliding, then diving in an accelerated stall, careening up into a chandelle, an aerobatic half-loop that ends with the tern rolling over on one shoulder, gaining speed, climbing, and diving again in a bount of aerial sighing and swooning. Bony-tongued fish, ananã, jump to feed. Caboclo fishermen still ply the water in bark canoes, which they steer from the front. Their black paddles are exclamation points dipping into the river.

Fifteen yellow butterflies dogfight and gambol in the green, sedgelike grass of the shore. An Amazon dove whistles. Then a fork strikes a crystal goblet, as if someone were earnestly calling the jungle to order. A flock of parakeets sounds like wet rope twisting into a chirpy screech. Toucans yap like distant dogs. Here and there a low, shallow bark canoe sits on the shore, awaiting its paddler, on business somewhere in the forest. A hawk with bright yellow feet and beak perches on a dead tree branch. Water splashes down a bank from an oxbow lake nearby. When a Brazil nut tree loses two leaves, they fall gently and hit the ground with a hollow clatter. Wheee!, a hawk calls like a child with a kazoo. Wheee! Soon the rest of the kindergarten band joins in with sandblocks, bottles, tin pans, bells, as different birds take over and the crickets begin to throb and itch with song. An Amazon bird related to the chicken makes a quaking buzz. A trogon calls, You! You! We float past a hematé that is wild white flowers, whose alkaloids are used in heart medicine. Tinkling wind chimes fill the air; then comes a howling trill. A spring door slapping and creaking on its frame is a frog.

The new moon makes a slender white canoe above the darkening trees. Bats scout overhead. Iain, knowing of my fondness for bats, tells me that once he saw a bat-eating fish that leaped out of the water, grabbed a bat, and dragged it under. Now the bottle band includes yawing and banheee moans. A white planet, southeast of the moon, floats low over the forest like a shard of ice. In the surging darkness, lights bloom on the river: a single yellow lightbulb from a house, the whiter light of a Zodiac’s lantern; the distant flash of a camera where the others are fishing; the twittering greenish-yellow light of fireflies, our ship lying at anchor downstream, lit like a miracle play. In my cabin, deliciously exhausted from the sheer sensory whirlm of the day and eager for the days to come, I brew a pot of casca preciosa and sip its sweet-scented tonic as the ship rocks gently on the ancient river. Then I fall into the well of sleep. For once, dream is the same as the waking world: there I again snorkeled in the river by moonlight, hear the muttering of monkeys, and follow a trail of leaf-cutter ants hauling home their small burdens along corridors of scent.

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It was dusk by the time we reached Pedro. A full moon had risen. He climbed aboard and took the tiller and motored through the night. Overhead one star after another popped out from behind the sky’s black curtain to take a bow, and, in the water, the small stars of caiman eyes peered at us.
from the forest’s edge. The moonlight reflected off the river. Pedro shut off the engine and we drifted, saying nothing.

I realized suddenly why jungles always made me feel so good. Why the tonic worked. Why I had spent so much time looking for something in them. It was the impossible luck of it all. There was no ultimate design, no meaning, no wisdom written in the trees. This forest, this scene, this moment was just a zany roll of the cosmic dice as if the Gothic builders had heaved the stone blocks and flying buttresses and gold leaf into the air and it had all come down as Chartres. In fact, if there were a God, He would spend His tough days visiting the man-made cathedrals and mosques and temples, where people believed in Him and asked favors and prayed for victories over the other guys who called Him by other names. And then He would come here into His green cathedral. He would crack open a beer, walk around in His boxers, put His hands on His hips and mutter, “How about that?” at the miracle of all this being thrown together out of the dust of the Big Bang. He would shake His head at the wild stroke of luck.

Meanwhile, people disillusioned with the world they made in other places came and knelt and prayed in the green cathedrals, supplicants seeking a momentary respite from complexity, an end to the grayness where life and meaning are undefined. But all the jungles could offer were moments, glimpses.

The green cathedrals were accidents and even more precious for that, but that was their only lesson. Accidents happen. Sometimes they could be good. Now, for crying out loud, put your clothes back on and go home. Get on with life.

It took the Amazon to finally make me see it. Miriam saw it, too.

She was stealing moments here, moments like those I had been stealing when life seems in sharp focus through nature’s lens; but in the end, she knew the dilemmas were still there—the diarrhea, the poverty, the social progress—and the green cathedrals were coming down. The jungles were going, and a handful of scientists and a fistful of dollars were not going to stop it. Still, if the universe had gambled and come up with the varzea, well, you never knew, did ya?

Two dolphins surfaced and breathed and dipped under the water. I looked at Miriam, who was smiling.

“Is this enough?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” she answered. “This is enough.”

—Brian Alexander, *Green Cathedrals: A Wayward Traveler in the Rain Forest*

SCOTT DOGGETT

**High on Iguaçu**

A helicopter ride over the falls transports the author to thoughts of the ultimate destination.

ON FURLough FROM LOS ANGELES, A CITY SYNONYMOUS WITH the worst of urban ugly, I found it impossible to hover high above the mocha swirls and the luminescent spray plume of Iguaçu Falls and not stare, stare, stare, bug-eyed and slack-jawed.

Just a few minutes earlier, as the roar of the cataracts drowned the roar of the idling helicopter, I could only think of the ride’s $35 ticket and the uneasy feeling I always get inside aircraft—aware of how often flights unexpectedly terminate, along with their passengers. Even as the copter lifted off and buzzed toward the sky, I couldn’t help but ponder the odds of survival if the fuel caught fire or the motor flew apart. The crash won’t kill me, I thought; it’ll be those long black blades that’ll do that job. I pictured the rotors slicing me into chunks.

But something wonderfully positive came over me at about 500 feet, as the faces of the tourists below disappeared and the horizon became a sliver between a baby-blue sky and a carpet of the greenest forest. It was a childlike feeling, not unlike the euphoria I felt the first time I extended a finger to a groping caterpillar and let him crawl on.