



## The Wealthy Ones

Though his left eye is clouded and never quite in sync with the right, Sebastião sees things very clearly. He and his wife, Hilda, live on an island in the middle of the Amazon River, in the little fishing village of *São Miguel*. They have plenty of fruit, plenty of fish, and plenty of slippery, bright-eyed kids. (Seven, I think...) But most of all, they have plenty of faith.

Sebastião and Hilda welcomed us into their home as though we were royalty, shooing out the children so that we could hang our hammocks in their one and only bedroom. Like other houses along the shore, theirs is raised on pilings – rough-hewn poles sunk into sand. Thus, the floor of their house sits about two meters off the ground.

As we climbed the steps in back and entered the kitchen, I noticed that the wooden floor and walls leaked sunlight between the boards and the metal roof was pocked and streaked with rust. While Betty hung the hammocks, I poked my head out the rough-cut window and took a look around. With the rainy season only half-

way through, the river was already slipping up around the house, creating little islands of sand and grass. On these the chickens were nervously congregating, accompanied by a pair of dull orange pigs and a dog that hadn't tasted protein in months.

Sebastião says that come Monday he'll be moving the livestock – including his horse, *Canela* – to higher ground. By the end of the month the river will be a meter deep around the house, cutting them off from their neighbors. At that point they'll have only two ways out: by canoe, which can be conveniently tied off at the back door, or by catwalk. The catwalk (suitably named, I think) is a rickety assembly of elevated boards and stakes that winds its way inland, through the papaya trees, past the latrine, to higher ground.

That night, after a fine meal of peacock bass (*tucunaré*), we turned in early. Despite the mosquitoes, I slept fine for a while, until – sometime after midnight – nature called.

I'm here to tell you, old friend, that rousting yourself