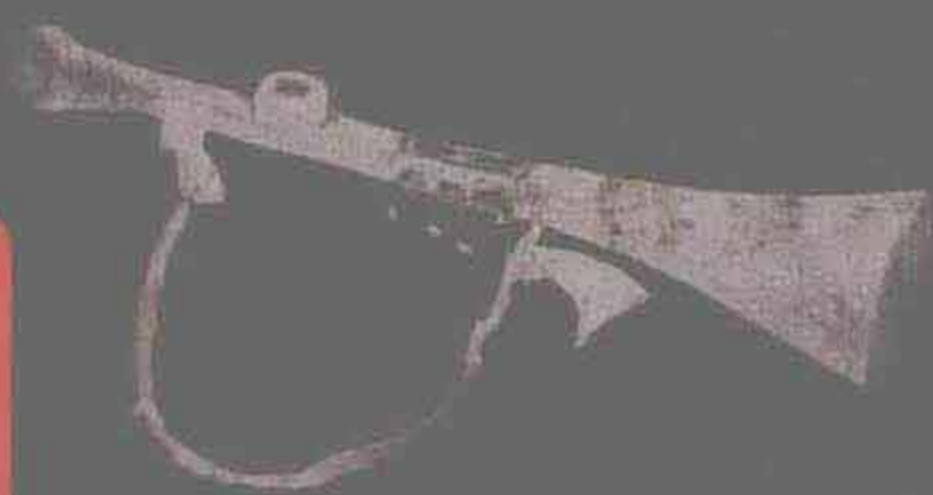


ENIGMA VARIATIONS

RICHARD
PRICE
AND
SALLY
PRICE





ENIGMA VARIATIONS

Richard Price *and* Sally Price

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ENIGMA VARIATIONS

BY THE SAME AUTHORS

Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest

Two Evenings in Saramaka

Stedman's Surinam: Life in an Eighteenth-Century Slave Society

Equatoria

On the Mall

BY RICHARD PRICE

Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas

Saramaka Social Structure

The Guiana Maroons

First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People

To Slay the Hydra

Alabi's World

The Birth of African-American Culture (with S. W. Mintz)

BY SALLY PRICE

Co-Wives and Calabashes

Caribbean Contours (with S. W. Mintz)

Primitive Art in Civilized Places

To our friends pictured within

Mr. Popescu: Can I ask, is Mr. Martins engaged on a new book?

Holly Martins: Yes, it's called "The Third Man."

Mr. Popescu: A novel, Mr. Martins?

Holly Martins: It's a murder story. I've just started it. It's based on fact.

Mr. Popescu: Are you a slow writer, Mr. Martins?

Holly Martins: Not when I get interested.

Mr. Popescu: I'd say you're doing something pretty dangerous this time.

Holly Martins: Yeah?

Mr. Popescu: Mixing fact and fiction . . .

Holly Martins: Should I make it all fact?

Mr. Popescu: Why no, Mr. Martins. I'd say stick to fiction, straight fiction.

Holly Martins: I'm too far along with the book, Mr. Popescu.

Mr. Popescu: Haven't you ever scrapped a book, Mr. Martins?

Holly Martins: Never.

Mr. Popescu: Pity.

—Dialogue from *The Third Man* (1949),
directed by Orson Welles, filmscript
by Graham Greene and Carol Reed

It wasn't a particularly impressive cortège that filed through the white-washed gates of the Cayenne cemetery. A dozen of his European friends, middle-aged and mainly male, the ruddy-faced *sous-préfet* and the head of the gendarmerie in dress uniform, a few local Creoles, and his housekeeper. We noticed that the director of the museum had chosen not to pay her final respects to Monsieur Lafontaine.

"His generosity," said Yves Revel, wiping away a tear with a flowered hanky. "That's what I won't forget." They'd been through a lot together, the small band of Pied Noir refugees who had arrived in Equatoria by way of Marseille when Algeria fell to the Arabs in '62. In fact, they'd fled from one end of the French tropical empire to another, in a sense merely exchanging "*sales arabes*" for "*sales nègres*," though a couple of them did pick up a taste for pretty mulattos along the way.

Drawing on the savings they'd smuggled out—inside their shoes, sewn into their trousers—they cleared sufficient space to insert themselves into the slumbering economy of postwar Cayenne: a souvenir shop here, a publishing house there, a cement factory across the creek outside of town. And the best bordello this side of Brazil, with something for every taste provided by a multi-hued staff from six countries.

In those days Cayenne was a town straight out of Somerset Maugham: somnolent in the tropical heat, profoundly colonial, and crawling with varieties of humanity originating from every corner of the globe. A few years before, a French physician had called it "an incoherence of races, a confusion of colors, a Babel of languages, a Babylon of imported vices." And a visiting anthropologist later noted in his diary, "the town is even more down-and-out than it was possible for me to foresee. The Place des Palmistes is a wasteland . . . Vultures roam the streets."

Smack in the center of Cayenne, in what had once been a gracious Creole home, one could visit the Musée Franconie, inaugurated by the resident French governor in 1901. If the Smithsonian Institution is its own nation's "attic," the Franconie may be considered Equatoria's. A

2 European journalist captured the flavor in this reminiscence of what he found:

A giant black caiman, varnished. A sloth with open mouth, hanging from a branch by its long nails, belly up. In a fish-bowl case, the kepi and epaulets of Governor General Félix Éboué.

A bush filled with hummingbirds. Several romantic pictures: *Victor Schoelcher, Liberator of the Slaves, on His Deathbed*, by E. Decostier, gift of M. Léon Soret, Magistrate; *Rouget de Lisle Singing the Marseillaise* by L. Pils, etching by Rajou; *Washington Crossing the Delaware among the Ice Floes* (winter 1776) by Leutze. A woolly opossum with a prehensile tail.

A series of large glass candy jars where a yellowish fluid holds in suspension fat black spiders like hairy crabs and dozens of snakes of every dimension, spotted, striped, hatched, and marbled. A relief model of the Kaw mountain range with its bauxite deposits. A Boni Grand Man's wooden throne incised with the chief's insignia. The rosary that once belonged to the Reverend Mother Javouhey. A vertebra from a whale beached at Mana about 1876.

The escape boat of a convict imprisoned at the Iles du Salut (gift of M. E. Laudernet). A series of naive paintings by the convict Lagrange, representing scenes in the life of the prison camp. A miniature guillotine for cigars in local wood, an exact copy of the one in the prison camp. The blade and stocks of the guillotine used to execute the bandit D'Chimbo in Cayenne in January 1862, bracketing, from above and below, a



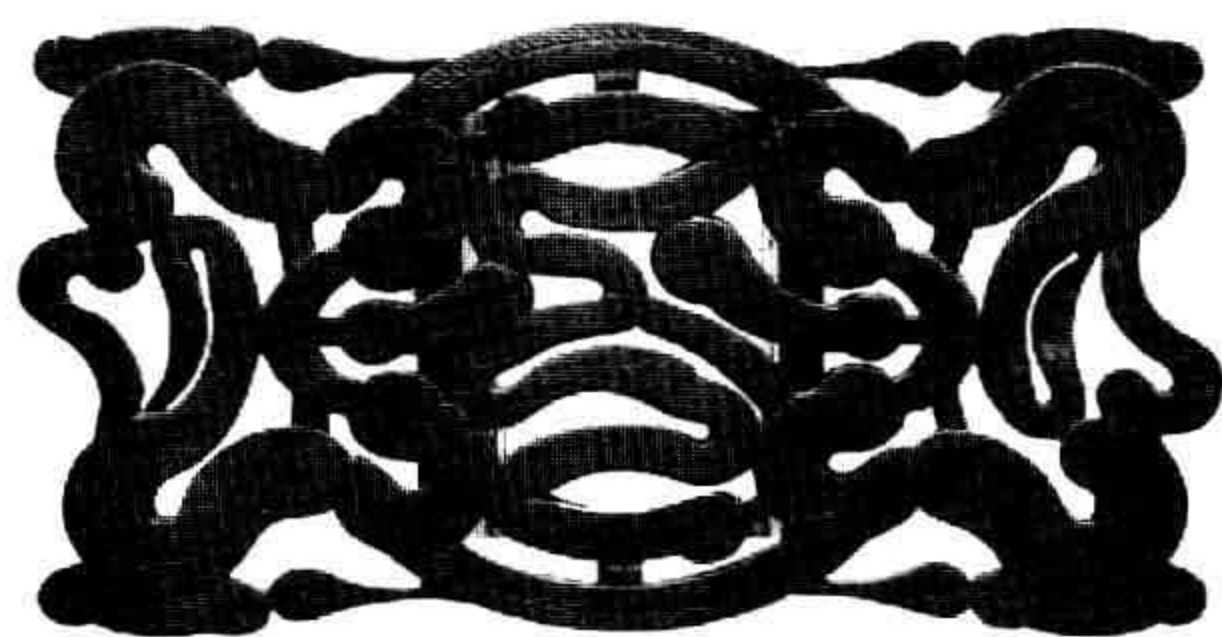
drawing of the famous bandit “executed” in pencil by M.-H. de Saint-Quentin—a replacement, according to some authorities, for D’Chimbo’s actual head, displayed in a jar of formaldehyde.

Although by the end of World War II the gates of the penal colony had finally been closed, its physical traces were still everywhere in mid-1960s Cayenne—the crumbling brick buildings that had once been part of the penal administration, the docks where prisoners had debarked, and the fortress-walled prison buildings now overrun with tropical vines. The couple of hundred *vieux blancs*—leftover French convicts—slept where they could, often under the royal palms in the square, clutching bottles of Algerian red. The mental traces also lingered. Every resident, from schoolkids to the elderly, carried the burden that Cayenne, with its offshore appendage Devil’s Island, was synonymous throughout the civilized world with degradation, brutality, and punishment.

During the heyday of the colony, while sailing south from Martinique “on a long, narrow, graceful steel steamer, with two masts and an orange-yellow chimney,” Lafcadio Hearn had caught the essence of the enduring myth:

It is the morning of the third day since we left Barbadoes, and for the first time since entering tropic waters all things seem changed. The atmosphere is heavy with strange mists; and the light of an orange-colored sun, immensely magnified by vapors, illuminates a greenish-yellow sea,—foul and opaque, as if stagnant . . .

A fellow-traveler tells me, as we lean over the rail, that



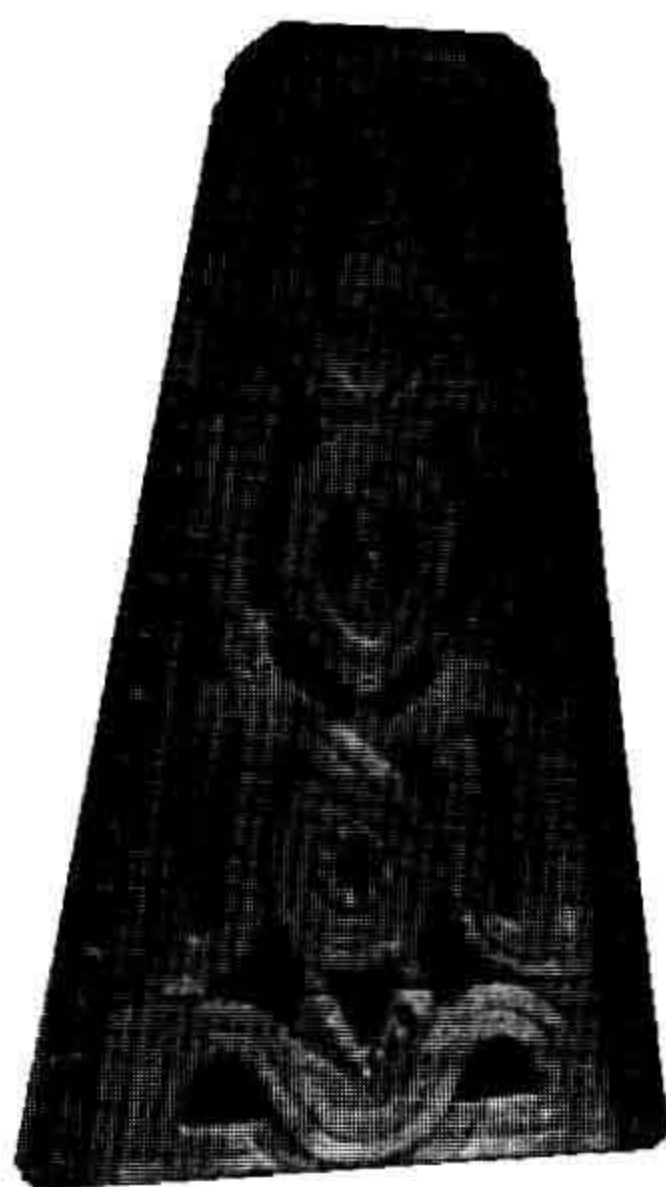
this same viscous, glaucous sea washes the great penal colony of Cayenne—which he visited. When a convict dies there, the corpse, sewn up in a sack, is borne to the water, and a great bell tolled. Then the still surface is suddenly broken by fins innumerable,—black fins of sharks rushing to the hideous funeral: they know the Bell!

It was on one of those blindingly bright Cayenne mornings, in June of 1964, that Jacques-Émile Lafontaine picked his way down the gangplank of the *Jeanne d'Arc*, which plied the waters between Marseille, Fort-de-France, and the colonial capital of Equatoria. On the quai, Yves and Claude, who had arrived on the previous month's voyage, waved their hats from the middle of the crowd and shoved their way toward their friend.

“And the journey?”

“Fatiguing—quite fatiguing. But I must say the meals were passable. Some excellent Bordeaux.”

Once he settled in, Lafontaine chose a different path from his businessman-friends. As a recently certified lycée teacher, he was assured a steady income. In fact he now benefited from the forty percent salary supplement received by all civil servants in France's Overseas Departments. But he soon found that expounding on Rousseau or Racine to an indifferent classroom of Creole-speaking children was less than fulfilling. Not long after his arrival in Cayenne, he decided to make a pilgrimage, via Belém and a tramp steamer up the Amazon, to the legendary opera house of Manaus. It was a place he had dreamed of as an adolescent, whiling away summer afternoons listen-



ing to Puccini on his mother's Victrola in their comfortable home overlooking the Bay of Algiers.

5

Belém was a revelation, his first truly tropical metropolis—half a million exotic people crowded near the mouth of the world's greatest river. He spent hours sitting on a wall by the docks, shaded by the iron scaffolds of the Ver o Peso Market, drinking mildly hallucinogenic soup from calabashes proffered by Indian women, and staring, transfixed, at the muscular stevedores unloading crates of merchandise from riverboats of every age and description. And then the leisurely ten-day voyage up the Amazon, with innumerable stops at trading docks to load firewood for the vessel's noisy boilers, passengers dozing in hammocks slung on deck, silent Indian canoes pulling alongside to sell green parrots, and the dramatic arrival around a bend in the river at the magical city of Manaus, then in the early stages of rebirth.

As a youth, he'd been much taken by stories of how, during the late-nineteenth-century rubber boom, the wealthy families of the Amazonian capital had sent their dress shirts all the way to Lisbon to be laundered and how, in 1912, the bubble had suddenly burst and the city been left to slide into decrepitude. Now it would soon have a million inhabitants and serve once again as the hub of one of the world's last "undeveloped" regions. He could feel the pulse. He could smell the sense of promise in the sultry air.

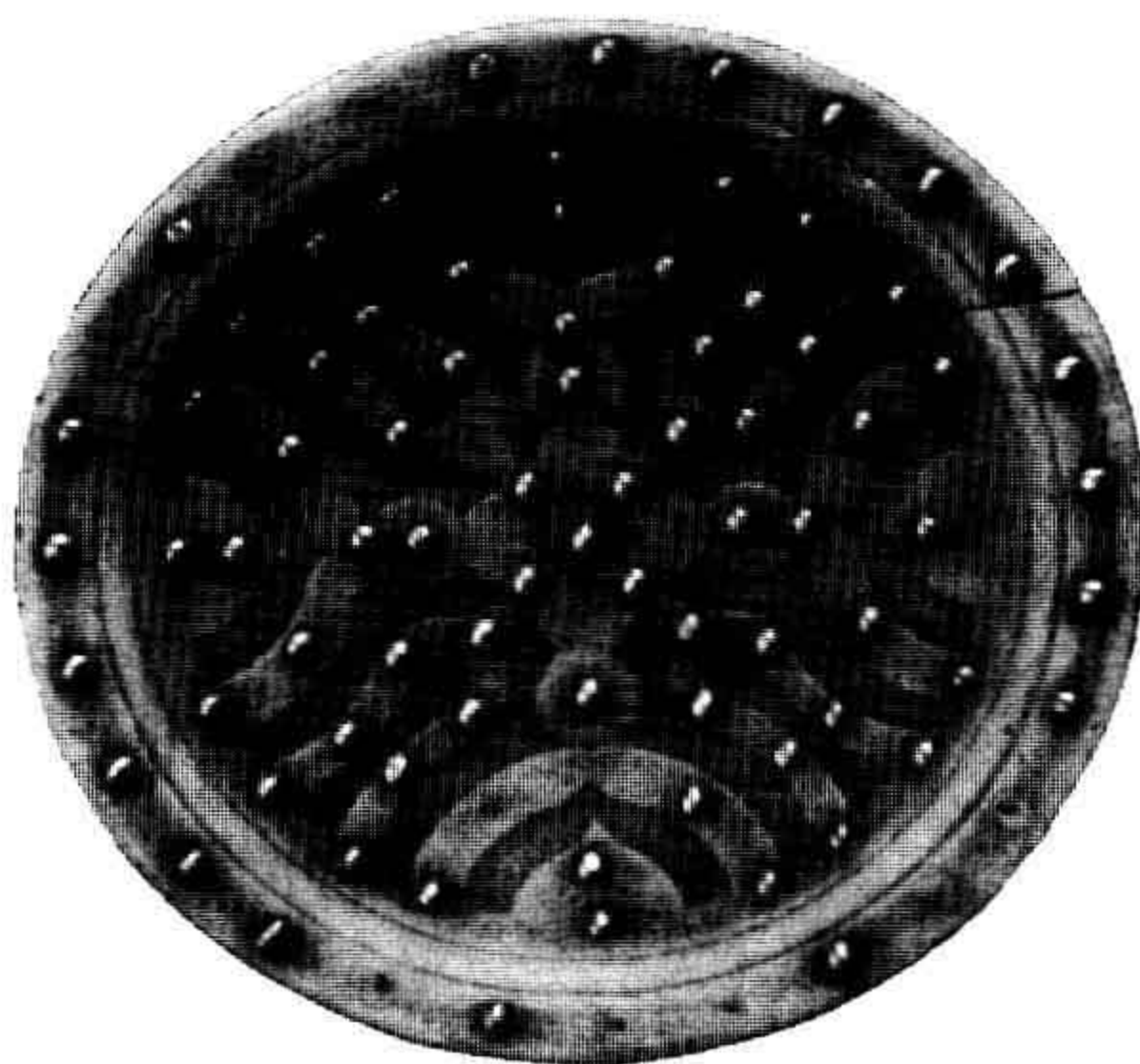
That evening, stepping off the steamer onto the crowded dock, he hailed a boy to carry his bag and asked to be taken directly to the Opera. There it was, at the end of the cobblestone street, the Teatro Amazonas! Though its shell was in moldy disrepair, its four-tiered balconies were crumbling, and paint peeled in great whitish sheets off the famous diamond-studded ceiling where nymphs, cupids, and satyrs



6 still cavorted on patches of fading frescoes, he found himself trembling, looking up at the vast interior space, now crisscrossed by fast-flying bats, where Jenny Lind had sung and the Ballets Russes had danced. Out on the street again, he found a boarding house and took a tiny room above a saloon. After a couple of Antarctica beers, a heavily peppered plate of rice and beans, and the better part of a bottle of Pitú *cachaça*, he fell exhausted into his hammock.

It was the next morning, at the edge of the sprawling Municipal Market with its cages of jaguarundis and parrots, that Lafontaine had his epiphany: a group of Mundurucú apparently just out of the forest—short annatto-decorated women with pendulous breasts, fierce men in scarlet loincloths, faces tattooed with what looked like giant outstretched wings. He wondered whether, under the loincloths they had adopted for city wear, the men had on the traditional three-cornered penis covers suspended from a cotton cord that he'd read about in a book on Amazonian Indians. The Mundurucús had surrounded themselves with basket after basket overflowing with brilliant, multi-hued featherwork: diadems and aprons, capes, girdles, and necklaces. The softness of the feathers gave him goosebumps. He bought what he could and hurried back to his room, where he finished off his bottle of *cachaça* and tried on the feathers, balancing on a stool before a rust-flecked mirror.

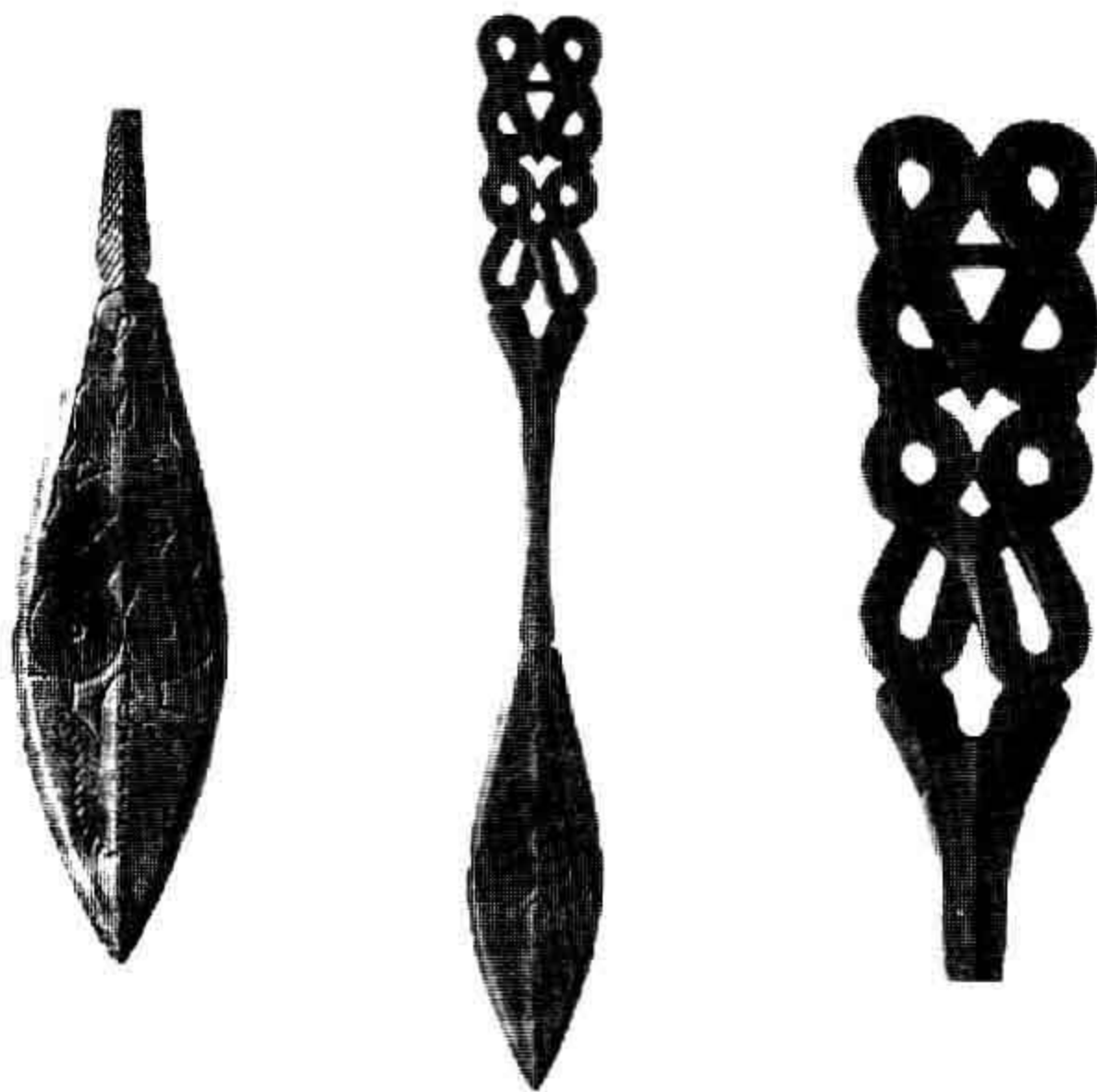
Over the course of several Christmas and Easter vacations in Belém, even then only a three-hour flight away, Lafontaine became an honorary member of the local circle of aficionados of jungle animals and exotic artifacts. Most evenings they gathered for drinks, conversation, and other pleasures at the ironically named Catedral, near the docks. Some of the more respectable members of this group were



patrons of the Museu Goeldi, an international center for the scientific study of Amazonian flora, fauna, and Indians. In its private park in the center of the city one could, for only a few hundred cruzeiros, sit on a bench shaded by flowering jacarandas and an enormous silk-cotton tree, and watch agoutis and peccaries wander by. But there were also the rough-and-ready traders in birds and animals, who traveled upriver, bought directly from Indians, and sold to anyone in town who had the connections and experience to get this living booty safely over the border. Monkeys, sloths, boa constrictors, jaguars, parrots—there was something for every taste, and the private market in Europe seemed insatiable.

Lafontaine's first animals were exported by boat—the mouth of the Amazon was ill-patrolled and exchange rates made francs attractive to both fishermen and the occasional customs inspector. By this time he had become friendly with officials in Cayenne who would stamp in his crates with barely a wink. Behind his modest bungalow in Montabo on the outskirts of Cayenne, Lafontaine, who had always liked to tinker, began building wooden cages. Within a couple of years, as a sideline, he opened a modest, semi-private zoo.

In the mid-sixties Cayenne was still best known to the outside world as “The Land of Eternal Punishment,” or sometimes more simply as “Green Hell.” But it was, by official French decree, about to be transformed into “The Land of Space Exploration.” For the glory of France, President De Gaulle in faraway Paris had decided to create “a French Cape Canaveral,” and the state would soon be pouring hundreds of millions of francs into a new satellite-launching station at Kourou, an hour to the west of Cayenne. This sleepy former colony—now barely 35,000 people, even when you counted in the



8 thousands of Indians and descendants of escaped African slaves who lived off in the forest beyond the state's administrative control—had been targeted to become a thriving, thoroughly modernized offshoot of France, what De Gaulle liked to envision as the nation's “show-window in the Americas.”

The construction of the European Space Center in fact brought great numbers of visitors—engineers, rocket scientists, computer technicians, and their families—for short stints in Cayenne. Among those who found their way to Lafontaine's suburban zoo were many eager to take home a souvenir. He soon determined that the only convenient way to export endangered species was on the military planes, not subject to customs inspection, that flew more and more frequently to and from the metropole, carrying the gendarmes and legionnaires needed for the beefed-up security of the Space Center. Europeans—*métropolitains*, as they're known in Equatoria—socialized with their own kind, and Lafontaine was soon on sufficiently good terms with the military dispatchers at Rochambeau Airport to have pretty much anything he wanted loaded into the bellies of the dull-green army cargoes.

At the same time, through the Amazonian featherwork he was bringing back in increasing quantities from his Brazilian jaunts, he was gaining a reputation as Cayenne's only serious collector of primitive art. The network of Brazilian collectors stretched from the Peruvian port of Iquitos, far up the Amazon, all the way down to Belém, and then overland to the wealthy metropolises of the south—Rio and São Paulo. But nearly everything moved through Belém, and Lafontaine's friends often served as middlemen, trading with one another, passing pieces along, selling to the occasional tourist or even museum curator from Europe or America.



What these men shared was a passion for feathers, for money, and for risk. In addition to collecting, some got involved in simple repairs, and then more extensive restoration, filling in the missing parts of the older examples of Xingú feathered crowns or Wayana initiation breastplates that came into their hands. Lafontaine fit comfortably into this milieu, with its disdain for officialdom, its sophisticated aestheticism, its diffuse concupiscence, and its greed. When the opportunity presented itself, he purchased a *pied-à-terre* in Belém, paying in cash.

Because of recent legislation and growing international pressures on Brazil, rare feathers had become one of the most difficult of all materials to move across the border. Through his drinking buddies, Lafontaine befriended a pair of army colonels as well as several high officials in the FUNAI—the government service charged with protecting the welfare of Indians—and on more than one occasion they got him out of tight spots, fudging a document here, putting in a phone call there. He figured out how to dismantle the more elaborate feathered objects without damaging them, to secrete the plumes under his clothing, and to reassemble the whole back in the privacy of his home outside Cayenne.

Over the years—mainly in Brazil, but on trips to visit his mother in Paris as well—Lafontaine scavenged in second-hand shops for books on Amazonian featherwork. He particularly treasured, for its detailed pen-and-ink sketches, an unbound, heavily illustrated monograph by a Brazilian named Darcy Ribeiro, which he had picked up in Belém. He'd also bought a couple of more common volumes on the art of woodcarving, as practiced by the blacks who lived in the forests of Equatoria, especially those known as Bonis and Saramakas.

Of an evening he liked to put on Tosca and turn up his hi-fi as he



10 lingered over a book about these descendants of rebel slaves, written by a French geographer and filled with detailed explanations of the sexual symbolism of carvings—and with stunning photos of Boni men. And though he could barely read English, he'd bought, on the rue de Seine, a book called *Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest*, which he enjoyed for its pictures of Saramaka woodcarvings.

By the late 1970s Lafontaine was devoting less and less effort to his teaching and his zoo, and using most of his spare moments to perfect his collection of feathers. He also bought a red MG convertible, and began to play something of the dandy, riding around town accompanied by a pet ocelot in the adjoining bucket seat.

“Whitefolks sure are funny,” Saramakas like to say. Those who had come over to Equatoria from neighboring Suriname to work as woodcarvers or day laborers sometimes saw Lafontaine driving around in his sportscar with a jungle animal they considered sacred, as well as dangerous, and they figured he must have some mighty strong powers—or else be crazy.

He began frequenting Saramaka camps by the side of the road, leaving the leashed cat in the car. The ambience he found exotic, and both the art and the carvers attracted him. Though he couldn't understand their language and knew little *patois*—the vernacular of Equatoria, normally used by these carvers to communicate with their customers—Lafontaine spent enough time hanging around the ateliers to gain a good sense of the woodcarving business. Through repeated visits he developed a few deeper relationships—one with a talented artist named Konfa, who lived at the edge of the forest, south of the city.

Unlike most Saramaka carvers, Konfa spoke some French. Back home, along the Suriname River, he was well known as an artist—first

