

Excerpt from “Flush”

It is the hot, rainy season in the jungle, and the deck is crowded with people sweating to get cool. Some stand at the bow hoping for a breeze; others retreat under the blue tarp for shade. Pevas is a two-day journey downriver, and I carry six liters of bottled water. The man who'd brought me on his motorcycle to the port had come aboard briefly—the only other person aboard to speak English—and though we'd just met, he was nervous to leave because I don't speak Spanish.

“You have water?” he had asked. “You know where you're going?”

The ship has three levels. There's the engine room, which houses machinery that grinds as when we pushed out of the origination docks in Iquitos or now as we approach tiny villages downriver, villages accessible only by boat. Machinery shares space with cargo in the shape of barrels, bags, and crates—precious cargo supplying each village's main *tienda*: barrels of petrol, barrels of water; bags of ice, bags of food; crates of soda, crates of beer. The main floor, where metal benches face a small TV propped on crates and more than forty hammocks are strung between the benches and the railings, is also where food is cooked and the ship's one restroom exists. I sleep on the deck, where another forty or so people cocoon themselves in thirty hammocks strung between railing beams.

I carry no camera, only a journal. In it I write: “The Amazon River is... so strong and full of silt you'd lose sight of the Secchi disk immediately. There are islands cradled by its waters that remain as lush, green fragments. There are thick, tall trees that stick out like pink-scraped chalk. Their roots, exposed, are deep hues of red. There are *Ficus* trees that appear to have been tiptoeing (across the jungle floor) and upon observation froze mid-step. I've seen army ants, soldier ants, fire ants, leaf cutter ants, and a solo black bullet ant nearly as long as my thumb.”

I write from my hammock, which starts swinging gently as the woman next to me gets up. The woman is slender with tight, curly hair. She shares her hammock with her infant boy and teenage daughter. The woman rises because she sees a villager selling raw boar meat; when the mother returns her baby is crying because she ripped one of his shirts to wrap the meat.

There is one thing I'm afraid of on this ship, and that is the bathroom. It is a dark, dangerous place slightly larger than a high school locker. There is a seat with a hole that does not flush. There is a pile of refuse expanding across the floor with each use, and the two women using the toilet before me left their sanitary napkins at the top of the pile, this mountain of paper wads carrying human feces. I have to step over this to reach the toilet. Sometimes this mess is swept to one side, and there are fecal trails from previous sweepings. The only tissue available is what I carry. In the dark, I need a flashlight. There are flies. I smell sickness. I try not to gag.

Across from the toilet is a basin where people brush their teeth and wash their hands, their clothes, their hair. There is a limited amount of water, which soon runs dry. The wash basin is dirty, and there is no soap. I carry with me a bottle of Purel even though I don't believe it works. I'm aware of my hands. I'm aware of the pathogens they carry.

* The complete essay first appeared in *North American Review*.