

Dear folk,

Peace Corps regulations forbid the publication of the names of volunteers' sites; in accordance with this regulation, I refer to all villages in Suriname by the name of American municipalities. The names are consistent from month to month. The contents of this email are my own, and do not reflect any position of the U. S. government or the Peace Corps.

*

Almost twelve months ago, the holiday email was the longest of the year, and, as I drafted this one, I saw I was headed for a repeat. It's been such a wonderful December; this is just the first two weeks of it, though the rest won't make so long a letter. Those two weeks were a great joy in the living, and I hope they aren't quite bad in the reading. In any event, may the holidays have found you well; I wish you all the best of New Years.

*

The Monday after Thanksgiving, I headed down to the river early to meet a boat chartered to go up to Langu, a stretch of the big fork of the Suriname named for the clan which is settled mostly there. Eventually, two small boats with 15 horsepower motors arrived; I got in, and we headed up. Barely an hour out of Kingston, we hit the rapids opposite La Salle, our first portage.

The volunteer from Baltimore took me aside and said that the boatmen had informed him that our trip upriver would take two days, rather than the one he'd scheduled. I laughed. My entire village (and, I later learned, several others as well) had said it would be impossible to make the run in just one day, given how low the water was: we were at the peak of the longest dry season the river had seen in years. The volunteer from Baltimore had organized the excursion, and it was a sign of things to come that he was one of the last of us to get an accurate estimate of travel time. I was actually happy, though. My concern had been that this would end up being some sort of smooth operation, with the Baltimore volunteer shepherding us from place to place like a gaggle of wet-eared tourists. The fact that the trip so quickly ran out of his control was reassuring.

What it meant was that from here out, it all was firmly in control of the boatmen. Though this was the first time I'd met these particular crews, I'm always happiest when I'm on the river in a boat piloted by a Saramaccan. It gives a wonderful feeling of professionalism, like being in the pit for a fine bit of theater. I quickly realized that the driver of the boat I was in was the more experienced of the two, holding back and directing the passes for both vessels. Our poleman was a Rastafarian from Boulder with meaty triceps that swayed in the wind as he reclined in the prow. A third man, boyish and built like a terrier, sat sidesaddle on a cooler amidships, wearing Ray-Bans and flirting with the women in the seat behind him. Being on the river two days with them would be a joy.

The portages were a constant fact. The largest of the day was the rapids at La Salle, where we all got out, removed our bags, and the boatmen towed the canoes up by the bowlines and gunnels. We soon lost track of the number of portages. There were the ones where only the poleman got out, tugging us over sand or rocks, ones where only the man amidships stayed in, and ones where all three got out. From time to time Serwin, the driver, would run us between two stones with a gap perhaps two inches wider than our beam, and at others, Rasta (for nearly two weeks, I never heard him answer to another name) would pump his fist down, and Serwin would jack the motor up, to keep the propeller off the bottom.

Below San Diego, we were dropped at the base of an island, and climbed over the western riverbed, now bone dry. The volunteer from Baltimore had asked to borrow my copy of *A River Runs Through It*, and now I understood why.

Night fell quickly; it was already evening as we hit Beaufort. The river is broad and flat and sandy there, and an improbably large group of teenaged boys was in it, washing and playing. They stood slightly more than waist-deep on our port and starboard, shouting, “Saka aki! Saka aki!”—Get out here. We motored on.

The last twelve kilometers to Forks took a surprisingly long time. We were running by moonlight, and the boats let us out on a stone that in the rainy season is at the bottom of a raging waterfall, and headed over to the village where we'd spend the night. We walked over the dry falls to the edge of town, where we found two buildings in which we might tie hammocks. The volunteer from Baltimore headed to a party, while a group of us sought out a place we might get some food: my dinner consisted in saltines and cassava cakes with mustard. The boatmen had invited anyone who wanted to join them to sleep on the stone, and while I was tempted, I begged off: they would be staying up all night, and while I've been in-country long enough that I was not worried that our drivers would be operating on no sleep, I knew I certainly could not.

I woke to a thick chill mist, promising a hot burn-off and a cloudless morning. I walked down to the dry falls and walked up them, passing the channel, straight as an arrow, running from the bottom to the top, and thought of the work it would take if ever one of the boulders on the side of it should fall in. The area was majestic. Saramaccans will usually tell you that the river is more beautiful in the dry season, but volunteers disagree. In the dry season, there is a film and detritus that often covers it, and the body of the river descends its banks, leaving the trees pendant above and little scraps of shoreline visible. At the height of the rainy season, the river swells its banks, and drowns the bottom branches of the trees on either side. The forest seems to rise fully-formed out of the waters themselves.

It wasn't until this morning that I understood the Saramaccan aesthetic, staring at the dry rapids through the mist, with the river a scene of quiet, reserved power, almost completely hidden. At the head of the falls was a Saramaccan shrine, and as if to remind me not to get too rhapsodic, as I walked over the stones on the left bank, back to the wall-less hut where I'd tied my hammock, I was struck by the smell of rotting snails in drying pools.

The boatmen quietly maneuvered the boats to the bottom of the one runnable chute, and tied off, unloading what few supplies were left in them, and removing the motors. These were all carried to the top of the rapids, where we were instructed to put our own belongings before joining them on the line. The volunteer from Baltimore wove down to the river; the men were to help haul the boat, while the women were relegated to pulling on the bowline as insurance if the men's hands slipped. The women pulled so hard on one of the tow lines that it broke, and we all had a good laugh, led by the boatmen, who said the women were just stronger.

At the top, we broke the supplies into two lots, packed one, and left the other on the shore, heading up into the big fork of the Suriname. The volunteer from Baltimore, reviewing the teamwork, cracked, “One single hand can't pull a boat over the rapids,” recalling the motto of a youth leadership camp he'd run. “No,” said Serwin, “it takes two.” I laughed, and thought of the Dutchman Marrenga, who'd made this very trip solo plenty of times, as, I was sure, had countless Saramaccans. Marrenga spoke of the stark individualism that the maroons had when he first arrived. Its edges may have softened a good deal in the last two decades, but it was a kick to hear Serwin asserting that, while just one hand can't carry a boat over, one man's two hands certainly can.

To be fair, when a volunteer thinks of a boat, it is usually of a motorized longboat for passengers like the ones we were in, the size of which have increased almost yearly as the horsepower of motors in use has gone up. Langu's longboats are constrained by the size of the chutes at Forks and Big Rapids, but many others are big enough for a fully-grown Saramaccan man to lay down in the beam, with only his head and heels peeking over the gunnels. The Saramaccan term “boat,” however, is as likely to connote a paddleboat that a passenger can swamp simply by throwing all her weight onto a one hip, and a number of men have motorized canoes barely larger, only enough so that they might cut a transom and mount an outboard, and small enough that their two hands can steer it over any rock or

rapids.

Our next stop was Big Rapids, said the volunteer from Baltimore, though there were plenty of smaller ones to cross first. I got into helping the men portage, and got a kind word from the poleman of the other boat, which was nice. Big Rapids had well earned their name; we tied off one boat, and as a crew headed down to retrieve the supplies left back at Forks, the rest of us carried everything up several hundred dry meters, and ate. The volunteer from Baltimore showed me the main chute here, a powerful drop, and talked about the different ways of running this stretch at different times of year. Now it was impossible to bring the large boats over, and a pair were waiting for us at the top; we'd transfer the motors and supplies and be off. Some of the male volunteers lent a hand to a boatful of women that had been running ahead of us since Forks carry their canoe over the stones, and wondered what they would have done without the aid. (One of the women was an albino, and Serwin had pointed her out to me when she first came into view, joking, "look, an outsider!").

The forest, which had run down to recent growth after Beaufort, and then stood to its full height slowly after Forks, came down again as we approached Langu. One last, barely noticeable, rapids marked the start of the settled stretch, and I looked ahead to some of the smallest villages I'd ever seen. A tourist camp and two villages were packed along a stretch of coastline less than half as long as that of Kingston. We dropped Baltimore's volunteer in his village, and tied up at Galveston, unloading. We would spend the night here.

This was the village of Ro, the small, energetic man who had perched on the cooler in Serwin's boat the first day. Just one matrilineage made up the whole village, and as I looked ashore, I was astounded by its wealth. The volunteer from Fitchburg had once teased Baltimore's volunteer that he lived "in the Hamptons," and while the volunteer from Baltimore is certainly correct when he says that the difference between villages on the upper Suriname is so slight as to be quite insignificant to anyone not deeply invested in Saramaccan culture, we still saw the difference as keenly as did the Saramaccans among whom we live: this stretch is nearly as westernized as my own, and in some aspects, is actually more so. Galveston, which is so small that you'd miss it if you sneezed going by, features two two-story houses, and a number of painted ones. As all around Langu, the women are rarely seen without at least bras, and the language features a good bit of Dutch and Sranan, and the only conversational use of the letter "R" in all Saramacca.

The captain of Galveston requested an audience, but the volunteer from Baltimore put him off, showing us his own village after sundown. Baltimore, he said, was founded in 1927 when Catholic missionaries came to the then-village of Lantui, and successfully converting villagers. His tour skipped the chapel, which was as well, because Catholic villages are perhaps the least recognizably-Christian of all Saramaccan Christian villages, and Baltimore especially so. Its hillsides are covered in shrines to ancestors and deities; god houses and flagpoles.

It was dark, notwithstanding the streetlights that lit up occasional areas in the streetless village, and nearly all I could see was the dirt and gravel under my feet, and the steep slopes. I thought of what the captain of Kingston said about how his village was prettier than Arlington, the seat of the tribal chief on the small fork of the Suriname. Kingston, he said, was like a Saramaccan village should be, flat, with fine sand. Arlington was hilly and dirty, and in the rainy season, you slipped along the mud of its paths. Pa Azor, Kingston's senior historian, who sits on his porch all day transmitting his knowledge to anyone willing to join him as he waits for his lunch to be brought, puts it differently later, when he hears I'd gone to Langu. "Baltimore," he said, speaking of a village of which he'd only heard tell, "it's there on a mountain falling into the river." And indeed, my first view of the village from the water was a house jutting over nothingness, supported improbably by posts jammed into the eroding hillside; when later I had an opportunity to walk around the village from landward during the day, I came upon the river suddenly, descending the cluttered main hill until I came to a short and stark cliff of clay that beetled down to the washplace.

That was still well in the future, however. The next morning, we piled into boats again, for the

third day of our trip upriver. I got into Ro's boat, which he drove with its 9.8hp motor, while a boy named Aleks rode pole, and an old man with a fishing pole took the middle seat. Not far beyond the last of Langu's villages, we came to a halt, and the old man prayed so quietly that only the two volunteers in the seat behind him could make out what he said. We made it to Awara Rapids, the bottom of which is guarded by a massive tourist camp. If the falls at Forks are the most majestic rapids of the trip, and those at Big Rapids the most fierce, these take the cake for the longest. At one point, our boat was swamped, losing four sandals (including my pair), a gas tank, a backrest, my shirt, and a spare lifejacket. Tony, the driver of the other boat, and I raced downriver to retrieve the bobbing goods, all of which we got except for my clothes. I went barebacked for the rest of the day, and barefoot until we returned to Galveston.

We'd run over a fairly significant rock early in the trip, and every quarter-hour, I bailed the boat with a plastic plate. The volunteer from Baltimore said today's trip shouldn't be long: it was three to four hours in the rainy season, and he doubted it would pass six even now. It turned out to be a nine-hour trek, with almost as many portages as we'd seen in the last two days combined. I missed having Rasta riding pole (at one point, when towing the second boat through a particularly rough rapids, he had growled, "This is not how we said. We talked all night about how we'd walk. Where is he going?" But of course he pulled it through).

We came to a sandy stretch, and Aleks saw a crocodile. The boatmen turned to us. "Can we kill it?" they asked. Ro's icebox read "Don en Ro Tours," and usually, whatever white people they brought up here were tourists, frequently squeamish at the Saramaccan tendency to see rain forest fauna as food. We were not so concerned, and Aleks took up a rifle as Ro cut the motor and circled the thing; he shot it behind the eye, and when he failed to butcher it properly (in his enthusiasm, the machete flew out of his hand at the first strike), Ro took over. Soon we were headed up again with tonight's dinner in an icebox. Ro and Aleks started to disagree about where the channel was; it was their first time coming this high when the water was this low.

As we climbed the river, the forest climbed above us, and massive trees that had fallen into the channel lay bleached and undisturbed, like ancient skeletons. The two volunteers behind the old man got punch-drunk, and started laughing at everything, but even they went silent for the last, rapidless stretch, and, after Ro said to Aleks, "Seeing is knowing," the entire boat sat quietly in awe.

The reverie was broken when the propeller hit a submerged stone; Ro cursed Chinese manufacture, saying that Americans make "original" propellers, and that an original one wouldn't have broken at that speed. He carried a spare, changed it out, and within a half hour, we'd reached Sentia Rapids, which presented themselves as a massive concave wall of stone.

We'd arrived.

The boats were beached on the sandbar of an island hard by the right bank of the river below the falls, and we unloaded, taking our supplies up to a gazebo nestled up in the treeline. The volunteer from Baltimore was upset when he found out I'd reserved what was now the group's last beer to give to Ro to split with the boatmen. "Way to go team," he said bitterly. I had other things on my mind at the time: a vicious gastrointestinal disease was tearing through the volunteers on the trip, and I was its second victim. I forced myself to eat some of the crocodile the boatmen cooked up, and got early into my hammock.

The next morning, the crocodile was already out of my system, and the men went out hunting. A massive river trout broke several hooks before the volunteer from Baltimore finally landed it with gibbets for bait. I wished I'd been up for going with the men on the hunt, but in the end, they returned with only fish. I climbed the rapids and looked north to the next bend in the river, not a hundred meter away.

At night, Ro built a bonfire. He'd done the same the night before, and I kicked myself once more for not going down, after I heard the volunteer from Peninsula say that they'd been told "ghost stories." Now Ro asked the old man to tell the story of Hillback, a village in the early eighteenth

century where Saramaccans remember a tactical victory over the Dutch, against whom they were then waging an ultimately successful seven-decade insurgency. The old man then told of the sinking of a Dutch canoe at the Big Rapids, and the name the Dutch gave to that rapids. (Later, Azor would tell me of his own trip there, while working on a malaria eradication campaign, and his devotions at a shrine just below the falls).

I was almost put out. I'd put months into research of Saramaccan history, specifically that of the Dominenge, slowly developing relationships and seeing where they might lead. It had been astoundingly fruitful, but here was just such a story, plainly told (though after relating what happened at Big Rapids, the old man rapidly begged permission of someone unseen, and hurried off to bed). I'd read that non-Christian Saramaccans regard such history as "secret" and "dangerous," but it certainly didn't present itself that way. Ro had heard the story before, and was showing off for us.

Back under the gazebo, the volunteer from San Jose, who'd listened to the story as well, said it didn't compare to the last night's fare: stories of running away along creeks. I kicked myself anew, but I was smiling as I fell asleep.

The next morning, we headed back down. I'd arranged with Ro that he show me the mouth of Sentia Creek, up which the ancestors of my own villagers had lived around 1762. He'd done a little plumbing to figure out how much I knew about it, and readily assented. The creek snaked into the forest off the left bank just above where we'd lost the propeller, surprisingly wide even in this dry time. The volunteer from Fitchburg took a picture, and we continued down.

Aleks spotted a red howler monkey a few hours downriver, and as we nosed into the tangle on shore, he jumped into the wall of the jungle and disappeared. Three shots rang out as Ro joined him, and he returned with two monkeys and a bushfowl. At Awara Rapids, the other volunteers teased us, calling ours the "killing boat." The dog of the volunteer from Baltimore came bounding up, and Ro said, "I don't have energy for this now." "Go kill something," he snapped at the dog, which had been trained by its master to be an exuberant pet, and gleefully ignored him, nosing into the boats as we dragged them down the rocks.

Ro took point from there on, and a ways downstream, he grabbed my head, swivelling it toward the right bank. "Tapir" he said. "Tapir tapir tapir." And sure enough, a tapir stood on the sandbar, drinking. Aleks got his rifle, and we came up on the thing, the size of a large farm hog, and only slightly more ugly. It started to cross the river. He fired two rounds at it, hitting it in the head and shoulder. It turned back and went under, wide-eyed, blowing out its nose. Before it rose, Aleks had gotten the other rifle and loaded it. He jumped into the river, looking back at us with the ecstatic joy of a kid on Christmas with a box in his hand after the paper was off. He shot the tapir lower in the shoulder and in the cheek again before it hit the shore, and tore off up a hill. We beached the boat, and he ran off after the game with the second rifle and a pack of cartridges. The other boat came down and landed beside us; Ro, the other boat's pole man, the volunteer from Peninsula, and I followed. Back in the forest was a camp, and Ro called out our position to Aleks, who'd peeled off the path behind the tapir. Four more shots rang out before the ninth hit the thing behind the jaw, the only place a bullet would pierce. Toni, who'd come up with the volunteer from Baltimore, turned and said, "If it was me, *one shot, one kill*. Boom," he said, in English. We dragged the tapir to the shore, and tumbled it down to the riverside.

The other boat contained a vegetarian volunteer, who covered her eyes as the tapir was tied to her bows and towed to the far shore. The old man stood off, saying a pair of prayers the volunteer from Baltimore took as instructions. No one else took notice of him, and he moved out of the way as they circled the catch.

The volunteer from San Jose was surprised. "They're doing it wrong," she said. She'd had several tapir killed, actively and in gun traps, around her own village, not far above my own. They were supposed to cut off the ear, and bring it back to the village, so that a party could go out and dress it. The tapir would be placed on leaves of the broad palm called palulu, and several ritualized prayers would be

said. There was a prescribed order in which the parts of the the animal could be carried back; for example, the neck piece could not travel in front of the head.

Ro was careful that an ear be cut off, and clearly knew all the cuts particular to the butchering of a tapir, but the process was done by the boatmen quickly, on a rock, before the sides were unceremoniously dumped in our bows before we resumed the trip. The water I was bailing from around my ankles had turned crimson from the day's haul.

We passed Casper, where a Dutch teacher was washing at the river. Ro called out to some Saramaccans on shore to come down to Galveston, where they would find something. It was not long after we landed that the news spread about the tapir, which is always the paramount catch on the upper Suriname. It's a bear to cook, taking four hours, and the women rushed a bit of it to our table in much less time; I heard it was not as good as it should have been, but I was again running to the latrine every few hours, and ate none of it.

In the morning, Ro presided over a final indirect revolt of the boatmen, which Baltimore's volunteer smilingly and distractedly settled as the sun reached high into the sky. "We knew what would happen when we left him in charge," said a colleague. A response volunteer who'd done two years in Benin said he now understood why Suriname's volunteers were so non-committal about the future: it was impossible to predict or control. Not so impossible as this, I thought, but I didn't really care. Whether the boat left today or two days from now, I wouldn't be on it.

Instead I would go up to Boulder, the last village in Langu, and therefore the last one on the river. It had been six days since I had telephone service, and I had no idea when my next opportunity to catch a boat back to Kingston would come. All I knew was that it would come eventually, and that I had no schedule. I would stay in Langu, as the Saramaccan formulation goes, until I was done.

*

There is a volunteer in Boulder, and she came down to Galveston to take me up the path. We passed through several small villages: small and sprawling Casper, with its green and white telephone booths; tiny Quincy nestled down in the trees; Fort Wayne climbing a steep ridge, and finally, on the far side of the forested cut of a dry creek, Boulder. We hit her house, about halfway from the Quincy path and the river, and I tied my hammock out back, exhausted.

It rained overnight; the next day, the volunteer took me for a proper tour. We headed back to Galveston, where Ro was to part the tapir to all comers. We passed him going to the river to wash, looking sheepish; we sat on his porch, awaiting his return.

He had told the San Jose volunteer and I how he felt about what is done downriver with game. It is wrong to sell it; it should be distributed freely, which indeed is the traditional way of handling the bounty of a hunt. But today, as we passed through Fort Wayne, a Galveston woman had expressed surprise that we expected to be given any of the tapir meat. Ro was selling it, she said.

We sat on his porch, joined soon by a boy taking English lessons from the volunteer from Baltimore. Ro returned, and we talked of trivialities. The bell for Baltimore's church rang, and the boy offered to take me down to Good Story. I accepted.

He was eager to show me a drawing he did, and brought me to his house, where he searched for it. I was glad to see Baltimore during the day, its houses, not so rich as those of Galveston, jumbled up on one another on the crown and sides of its big hill. He took me around to some cousins and his grandmother, and I was surprised at the asymmetricality of some of the houses. We passed on, over a dry creekbed, to Good Story, a tourist camp easy to mistake for a village, just below Baltimore. There were several workshops, and of course the houses, with names in Dutch and Saramaccan: "Plezier/Piizi." Pleasure.

I'd begged off going to the church service, because I didn't know how long I could stay. The boy offered to take me to see the building, but I was even less eager to play the pure tourist, and again said

I'd rather not. I might as well have gone, I realized when we got back to Ro's. "He says they already parted it," said the volunteer from Boulder. I asked Ro: apparently someone else had given away all the tapir just up the road, without him knowing.

I did not inquire further. The village, comprising just one family—Ro's—and covering only the flat at the riverside and the ridge up behind, was not big enough for such a thing to happen without his knowledge. I thought about what the woman in Galveston woman had said. I'd not believed her at the time; after all, Ro had waxed eloquent about the impropriety of selling meat on the upper Suriname, instead of sharing it freely. I was also a bit put out: as we went up to Sentia, Ro had offered me one of his sisters in marriage (proudly noting that his father had twenty-one children), a rhetorical device used with new friends.

People who write about Surinamese maroons often stress their goodness, gentleness, and honesty. Which is fine enough so far as it goes: if you're going to make sweeping moral generalizations about a culture, it is far better to be positive than negative. In the end, Saramaccan morality is sufficiently different from that to which I was accustomed in America as to make such judgments irrelevant. I like to think of Saramaccan men and women as so many Odysseuses and Penelopes, though a Saramaccan woman might be slightly less thorough in her avoidance of suitors than was the Greek heroine. Lies and evasions here are, in many contexts, including in many cases with friends and family, entirely acceptable. They can even be the mark of a particularly faithful person. All of which is not to say that Saramaccans are bad, cruel, and dishonest rather than good, gentle, and honest. Individually and collectively, they are simply more beautifully complex than all that.

Fewer boats run to Atjoni in a week from Langu in the dry season than make the trip from Kingston in a day, and we arranged with Ro to let us know when he heard someone was going down. He gave us some tips on how best to catch a plane, should no boat be available. We got up to go, and Ro smiled at me, saying he'd be sure to see me again before I left Langu. Which indeed he did.

We headed back up the path. I was charmed by the Langu phrase for travelling between villages. In my own stretch of the river, day-trips and jaunts to nearby villages are glossed plainly: "I'm going to Malibu," or "I'm going to La Salle." Here, even intervillage trips that might not much exceed two hundred meters in distance, and be performed entirely on foot, are spoken of rather more grandly: "Woman, I'm going upriver"; "Father-in-law, I'm going downriver." People are almost always addressed in terms of their relationship with the speaker, and the relationship is strongly reciprocal: one word suffices for "father-in-law" and "son-in-law," as also "mother-in-law" and "daughter-in-law," and "brother-" and "sister-in-law." Saramaccan is a language whose vocabulary is further constrained by a very rigorous set of norms of usage: ask a person who's just eaten if there's any food left, and you'll get a slightly confused look; the proper question is if it's still there. These norms, which produce a melodic enough language downriver (it is one of only two tonal creoles in the world, my anthropologist friend reminds me), make for fine contrapuntals up past Seattle.

We had plenty of opportunities to tell people we were going upriver as we headed to Casper, perhaps the flattest of the Langu villages, if only because its shore and front ridge have been given over to a tourist camp, two schools, and an abandoned church. The bigger school was Moravian (the headmistress, upon hearing that I lived in Kingston, asked after Pa Jay, an elder who lives just behind the Obed en Alexanderschool, and acts as a sort of guardian angel to teachers posted there), while the smaller, exclusively for young kids, had just been accredited as independent. I looked into the classrooms, which were positively packed with toys and books. Only the lack of electricity and the wire mesh windows separated it from any Dutch kindergarten you might see.

The camp, Come Sit, was run by Rice Man, a fellow rather well-known up and down the river. It was the finest one I'd seen, and he told of us his imminent expansion into selling carved goods. We sat in a gazebo (a real one, as opposed to the wall-less shelters I call gazebos for want of a better name) that perched ornately over the river, looking out over the landing strip.

It was this strip that made for Langu's wealth relative to slightly more northerly communities (a

second one, down at Mooresville, does the same for the small fork of the river). I'd never seen so much neatly tended grass, and I looked down the sod runway rolling gently into the distance. It was perhaps a little longer than it strictly needed to be, likely because it ended at the river; I didn't envy any pilot who overshot it. We ate lunch and waited out a small shower before heading up to tiny, tree-shrouded Quincy, with more trees than I'd ever seen in a village.

The walk from the river in Casper, past Quincy, to the far side of Fort Wayne, is shorter than my walk to the river in Kingston each morning. Fort Wayne was to be the treat of the day; we headed to the neighborhood called Valley, where we were sat under the fruit trees of Moiston, a woman who sold home-made peanut butter and traditional clothing. We were joined by a widow from Ogden.

Ogden lies in the poorest stretch of the river, which for that reason shows the least outside influence; her husband was born there, and lived there all his life, but was taken here, to his mother's village, to be buried. She wondered if she would be allowed to return home in time for the new year, but doubted it. The duration of mourning for widows and widowers is entirely at the discretion of the family of the deceased, which hosts them as long as it wishes to do; usually anywhere from three to six months. It is not uncommon to see widows being politely obstreperous, declining all sorts of food offered to them, and generally making themselves smilingly uncompanionable, for as long as they are made to stay in the Dead House, wear black, and sit on the floor.

The widow, with perhaps three months' growth of hair since her head had been shaved at the funeral, was quiet, and, after a brief discussion of cross-stitch, embroidery, and tailoring, we talked of village life.

Langu poses challenges for cartographers, not least of which is the simple and interesting question of what makes a village. The best cultural map of Saramaccan territory lists Good Story as a village rather than a camp, while the most accurate recent map, published in 1998, has Meeting Time, which Saramaccans call a plantation area, listed as a village. Moiston was confident about Meeting Time: it is a plantation area belonging to a single man and his family. She then said one of the wonderful things people sometimes say, things that crack open a door you'd never known existed. She said, "You can't do the things there that you can do in a village." I've not yet had an opportunity to follow up, but it was interesting, and unexpected, to find out that there exists, to Saramaccan conception, a noteworthy class of things that can be done in a village, but not in other settlements, however long-established or populous they may be. I'd imagine much of the burial rites are included in this category, based on a little scandal that played out in Murray earlier this year, but that's simply a guess.

Part of the reason Langu raises issues of what separates a village from a settlement is that the villages are so small, and so unlikely to be visited even by other Saramaccans. Sooner or later, nearly every elder goes to the far more navigable small fork of the Suriname River, if only because that is where the tribal chief's village stands. Outsiders with a tribal perspective are apt to go there too, for much the same reason. Yet a small, out-of-the-way village like Galveston or Quincy might not present much a different face to visitors than a large plantation area. This difference was likely to be even less pronounced thirty years ago, before Saramaccan building styles diversified.

Meeting Time's issue is compounded. Unlike Good Story and the villages I visited on my trip, it is not accessible on a walking path from the rest of Langu. Indeed, it stands opposite Grand Rapids, to which our conversation now turned.

Moiston said Grand Rapids has the same god as Beaufort, that is, the Langu village performs devotions to the god mainly worshipped in the more famous Dominenge one. In both, the god refuses access to non-Saramaccans. The reality is certainly more complex than can be grasped in conversation with any one person, and the widow sitting not far from Soft Stone arched her eyebrows, noting drily that outsiders have been allowed in Bangor for some time.

Bangor, a Nasi village of which, like Beaufort and to a lesser extent Grand Rapids, it was often said that outsiders may not visit. Nonetheless is not closed to them anymore. Indeed, if the volunteer

from Fitchburg is any guide, Bangor requested a Peace Corps volunteer in the last round of site placements.

Moiston was unmoved by her the widow's eyebrows, and offered to cook for us. I'm almost never one to pass up a Saramaccan meal, but I asked that we be excused: they day was getting on, and there was still one more man with whom I wanted to sit.

Johan lives at the edge of the path to Boulder, where he cares for his mother. As I met him the first day I made the trip down from Galveston, he said I could come over any time, and this, I hoped, would be the day. We found him there, and he motioned us up to a house that had been nearly completed by a man who had lived, and died, in French Guiana.

Everyone, in speaking, makes certain assumptions based on their sense of conversation, and one of the things I most like about talking to river Saramaccans, whose daily opportunity for interaction is rather more limited than is that of city folk, is the way in which a conversation with one person can function as a completion or answer to that with another. When I first saw Johan, he motioned around his neighborhood, and said to me, "All the people around here have gone. Only my mother and I remain." We'd continued into Boulder, where we met an old woman, who, hearing I'd come to visit her village, said, motioning to the empty houses around her, said, "All the people died, and we alone remain." Now, Johan, just before we settled into chairs in the house of the deceased French resident, said, "Not dead, they died. They parted, completely gone. That's how it's dead."

It is an academic commonplace that significant out-migration is an issue almost exclusively for the downriver villages. When I suggested to one expert that I thought there might be evidence of a standard rate of non-residency, common to Christian and non-Christian villages alike, rich and poor, in the upper, middle, and lower reaches of the upper Suriname, the claim did not even merit a direct reply; low residency rates was a downriver phenomenon. Historically, that has been the case. Downriver Saramaccans had the earliest sustained contact with the outside way of life, and the contact resulted in a number of them decamping for the city or elsewhere.

Everywhere, there is internal non-residency, which is mostly offsetting: Gadu, Basje Jul's sister, lives in Peninsula, not Kingston, and will not likely visit but for a funeral; Gemma lives in Kingston, not Seattle, and also will travel only for funerals. Both will be brought home on their death.

The most significant non-residents, however, are the ones who have relocated externally. In Kingston, Delva, Great Bea's daughter, who lives in Brokopondo and works for the government, is such a person; so is Selda's sister Germania, who lives in the capital. Upriver, the out-migrants are more likely to live in French Guiana; their children may return (as Boulder's Rasta has done), or they may not do so.

Johan asked me about Kingston; did I know a man called the Baptist? I answered that I did. "My cousin," he said, explaining that a number of brothers parted after refusing to live together; one went to Kingston, one to Peninsula, one to Fort Wayne, and others still elsewhere. I spent most of the rest of the month trying to parse his claim to kinship with the Baptist, whose lineage already seems strikingly overdetermined, with the Ahosi and Lama matrilineages of Dominenge on both his father and mother's side, both of which I can trace to the third generation; his surname is Zandveld, which also occurs on both sides of his family. Johan's own mother is a basje in Fort Wayne (though I know nothing of his father's line). In the end, the whole experience provided a useful cautionary tale: though clan and lineage identity is a central part of Saramaccan's lives, both have been, and continue to be, far more fluid than the rhetoric lets on. Pa Jay, the Baptists paternal uncle, simply shrugs his shoulders and smiles.

Johan was more eager to tell stories than I was prepared to hear them, and, after briefly outlining the foundation of Boulder, Quincy, Casper, and Grand Rapids, he told the story of a mountain. "Our ancestors," he said, "didn't want to tell us how to go there," and the knowledge passed out of Saramaccan consciousness. Then Marrenga, the Dutchman who lives across from Kingston, came. "Mendo walks in the forest," Johan said, approvingly. He showed Rice Man how to get there, and when

they went, they came to a cave like a house.

I thought I misheard the name of the mountain, and he repeated it with a twinkle in his eye that made me profoundly unsure as to whether it was really the name at all, or whether the ancestors, or Johan himself, weren't putting one over: it is called, he said, You Don't Go.

The conversation went on some more, until Johan, who had at first admonished me that I was not asking questions, now admonished me in the same stern and smiling tone that he was done talking. My fellow volunteer and I returned to Boulder, where I returned to my hammock, loving Langu.

Over the next few days, I helped the volunteer in Boulder with a sport project she was running at the Moravian school in Casper, which was nice preparation for me. I'd already started a series of similar projects (all revolving around bright blue soccer balls) in my own stretch of river, but allowed several of them to be postponed. I now had the certainty of what it would take to bring them to completion.

We also walked around Boulder, with its amazingly unwashed houses. The volunteer from Baltimore is undoubtedly right when he says that the difference between villages is far smaller than we, trained to perceive it, see it to be. But still, I enjoy going from village to village. Even in Langu, with its strong inter-village family connections (connections which, on the negative side, may contribute to the fact that it has one of the highest rates of albinism on the river), the differences are striking. Boulder looks ever so less economically-connected than Fort Wayne, though it has more zinc roofs. Both villages have more traditional-style houses than do Quincy, Casper, and Galveston, and all the villages had smaller houses than I saw in my own stretch of the river. A mid-sized traditional-style house in Boulder is just smaller than the minimum size of an American one-car garage, while a house of the same style in Kingston is about twice as big. Boulder was full of the windowless, steep-roofed, low-eaved houses that fill the photos of visitors to Saramacca from the early twentieth century, and all the villages up here were full of shed-sized versions of the raised drying racks known as "sula" or "suwa"; in Kingston, these were shrunk to the size of a pair of wooden planks, running under the roof of a gazebo or in the bedroom of the same building in which the family lived.

Boulder's outsider houses were charming: many had the same floorplan as traditional houses, but the eaves were fluttered up, and the doors moved from the gable ends to the sides. After a year and a half looking at more or less steep-roofed Saramaccan houses, the Boulder outsider version with its raised eaves looked to me like a startled bird about to take flight.

Boulder, like the rest of the Langu villages, still had a large number of (mostly empty) houses with ornately inlaid front walls. Occasionally the whole thing is set up on stilts, like a sula. These last were much larger than the typical house, and I thought I would gladly trade my eye-height walls and five windows for such a beautiful piece of carven architecture.

There was not a palulu roof in sight: the thatched houses mainly had pina tops, which are far more durable, if often harder to acquire. The dry season is ideal time for thatching roofs, and there were stacks of pina fronds around the village. I wondered what would happen in the case of a flood. Pina mainly grows in marshy, lowlying areas, and I wondered if Boulder's pina swamps were as close to it as were Kingston's palulu groves.

We visited one of the few agricultural plots that ran right up hard on the side of the village. Turning over the gravelly earth in my hand, I was amazed that any crop could be raised from it. Downriver, such village-side plots were common, if pebble-less; many of the more distant ones had been overgrown for decades, and were now used more for their lumber than for planting.

We got a view of a type of medicine involving bottles and sandals buried around entrances, and were invited to an outdoor ceremony in Fort Wayne. I'd never been to an outdoor ceremony in a non-Christian village; what is more, this was for twins, and was therefore a much bigger deal (though as Johan said, in his oddly eager non-chalant way, the only real difference was the drumming). My log for the week was filled with more lovely, minute details than I'll ever have cause to tell, but eventually the time came for me to go back to Kingston.

A man from my village had died in the capital, Moiston said. No one could say who it was (at least, not in a way that I could understand: the man was Boy's father. Even when I got back to Kingston, I couldn't make heads or tails out of the name Boy).

I'd been happy enough to stay as long as I had to do, but was now eager to return. I was concerned that the deceased might be a basje who had recently gone to the academic hospital in the capital for treatment. Days later, as I was finally about to leave, I came upon a Kingston man in Casper, with a phone that worked; he told me for whom the funeral was to be held. But for now, all I knew was that I wanted to be there for the burial ("They bury fast there," said Moiston, a formulation almost identical to an academic work on Saramaccan practice. I thought of the three-week rites in which I'd taken part, but to a certain misleading extent, they were right: downriver, the burial comes at the front of the three weeks, whereas upriver, it comes at the back).

Liking to be always overprepared, I arranged for a boat, and also for a plane. Planning in Suriname is like an exercise in probabilistic logic: I knew the odds were low for either one to leave on time, with me aboard, but thankfully the odds were even lower that neither could get me where I wanted to go, when I wanted to go there.

All of a sudden, a boat's crew had been assembled for the trip downriver, and when the day came, I went to meet it. Perhaps it was going to Sterling; perhaps past there. A woman doing her wash at Casper said it made no difference to her. She didn't know the area down there. We waited hours for the boatman and poleman before the run was cancelled, and I crossed over to the airstrip, disappointed. I'd never flown over the rainforest before, and I knew the view would be breathtaking and that I might never get another chance. Still, I wanted to arrive in Kingston in time for the burial (the medical clinic nurse at Casper, a Kingston man, looked disappointed when I said I might miss it), and what is more, I wanted to be in a boat, passing the upriver villages again. But now it was near midday, and I waited for the plane to arrive as a woman raked around the gazebo where we sat.

I never saw the plane land. A boat pulled up with the tardy crew members and new passengers: both of which were dominated by the family of Don—the other half of Don en Ro Tours. We were off. I doubted we'd make it before nightfall, and we picked up and dropped off people on the way. Our poleman for the first stretch was a fellow who gave the driver fits, and led us over the top of rocks which buckled the keelboard of the boat. Maroon canoes (we'd actually started off in a Ndjuka-style one) are not especially watertight, but excellent for dragging over rocks and steering over boulders. This month's issue of *Vanity Fair* says of them, in an article about the Foreign Legion in French Guiana: "These were wood-planked, leaky, and extremely crude, but capable of carrying as many as 14 men and tons of supplies, and particularly resilient during encounters with submerged trees and rocks." I wouldn't say they were all that crude, though the lifespan of one rarely exceeded two years. The author underestimates the capacity—they can seat fourteen men easily, and forty in a pinch—but he's dead on about their resiliency. Even I doubted, however, as our sleepy-eyed poleman led over one rock that turned the keelboard almost inside out with a ripple of loud cracks, just above Beaufort.

We stopped at the stone at the village's mouth; a woman, not waiting for a greeting, asked me if I'd come to the village, and I replied, in stock phrasing, that I had. "Let's go ashore," she said, but we continued downriver. We dropped the poleman at San Diego, where there was a funeral for which he was bringing gifts. Don and his family were bringing yet more funeral baskets for their own destination, which was somewhere below Sterling; perhaps the plantation area just above Palm Springs (itself a Langu village). They weren't sure where. Don took over pole duties, while his sister and her friend grew silly as we passed Seattle at dusk, switching to Sranan Tongo and saying the forest here wasn't real.

Night fell after we passed Murray, and it got so that I couldn't distinguish the shore below us, and the boatman couldn't see Don's hand gestures; we beached on sandbanks multiple times. I expected us to pull in somewhere for the night, but we didn't. Don and Pretty Boy, his brother, jumped into the water at La Salle, guiding us through the rapids in the inky darkness. It took almost half an hour; when

we reached the bottom, I felt like applauding the performance, and was glad no one could see the gleeful grin on my face.

Still, by the time we reached Sterling, I could tell we were missing the channel by a ways. Passing boats chafed us for running at night without lights. We pulled into Kingston after eight, and all got out. Don and his family were going to the same funeral I was, and it was time to get ready.

All the Best,

Dale Battistoli.