

BRUCE TELOPA

New Communion, 2014
Oil on Canvas, 30 x 42 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

WALLACE BAINÉ

Voyage of the Rodrigos

The following is excerpted from the recently discovered notebook of Esteban Quiñones de Cuervo, seaman on board the vessel Santa Maria de la Inmaculada Concepcion, under the command of Admiral Don Christopher Columbus, summer/fall 1492.

September 28, 1492

Okay, so no time to compose love sonnets here. Once Columbus figures out that I stole this paper and quill from his quarters while he was up on deck telling another one of his idiotic lies to keep the crew from tearing him to pieces, I'll almost certainly be hung from the main mast and thrown naked to the sharks.

Of course, the "Grand Admiral of the Ocean Sea," as he likes to be called, doesn't strike me as the quickest dung beetle to the cow patty. If he doesn't bust me, then one of these yard goons he's hired as a crew probably will. Once I'm seen in possession of paper, I'm sure they'll beat me senseless so they'll have something to wipe across their hairy arses other than the one piece of burlap everyone's been sharing since we left the Canary Islands.

I don't know, maybe I'm overestimating this bunch. So far, they've really been nothing but a bunch of bedwetters and crybabies. Twenty-two days out of La Gomera island, and they're ready to mutiny just to go back home? Twenty-two days? We're just getting started!

Every time the wind goes flat for a bit, they start wailing and carrying on like a bunch of little girls. We're sailing west to the Orient, for God's sake. What the hell did these guys expect, we'd be back by supper time? Considering the caliber of these losers, maybe we should switch names with the Niña. It would fit us better.

Seriously, I thought this would be a pretty rugged crew. We're doing what no one has ever done before, and it's probably a goddamned suicide mission. I figured I'd finally get to sail with some real sailors, men who would think an agonizing death by sea would be a fair trade for a great adventure. Instead, I get this lot, a bunch of moaners and tremblers constantly bitching about the captain.

For the record, I don't have a lot of confidence in the Big Salami either. I wouldn't bet he could navigate his way across a chamber pot, but he hasn't killed us yet.

Still, I want no part of any mutiny. This ship turns tail and heads back to Spain, I'm swiping a longboat and taking my chances heading west. Sure, I'll probably die. But I'll die like a man, in a boat where a sailor should die, headed in a direction other than back home to Mommy.

It's hilarious to watch the admiral stomp around below deck telling anyone who'll listen that some bird he saw, or some piece of seaweed he pulled out of the water, is a sure sign that we're getting closer to land. What a load of caca. Every day, the same story, and every day these dumb Spaniards buy it—at least for a day or so, then it's back to praying for God's mercy or a strong westerly wind, whichever comes first. Pathetic.

I'll cop to admiring Columbus's cojones for actually attempting what all the other barstool mariners only talk about: striking out for the east by heading west. Ballsy, no doubt about it. But he's perfectly delusional. He seriously thinks we're going to reach Cipangu in this leaky tub. Japan! We're just as likely to sail off the edge of the world and land on the moon.

This guy is actually taking his calculations from Marco Polo and Aristotle! I happen to know that every royal geographer from Portugal to Britain believes this voyage to be impossible, that Columbus's estimation of the size of the globe is wildly off the mark. Yet he's rejecting the consensus of Europe in favor of a weaver of children's tales and a Greek who's been dead close to two thousand years.

So why, then, did I even sign on for this fiasco? Well, perhaps I'm as delusional as the old Salami himself, but if the world is as vast as the geographers say that it is, I'd say there's pretty good odds that there's something out there, something we don't even know about, perhaps a land that men haven't despoiled with their ambitions and greed, where great creatures we can't even imagine roam the landscape, a place of foods we haven't tasted, sweet waters we've never drunk.

I'm already twenty-eight—what's the expression, "one foot in the grave"?—and I've screwed up my life back in Andalusia pretty bad. If I reach some undiscovered country, and even if I die there a day after landfall, being the first man to die in a new world—well, that's a pretty cool way to end it.

So, I have no choice but to hitch a ride with this overly pious Genoan for the time being. Obviously, he can help

me get where I want, but I have to be wary of him and his oily pronouncements. This is the dude, after all, who convinced our insane Queen Isabella to finance this idiotic scheme to begin with. Clearly, Columbus is a bullshit artist of the first order. I mean, a liar of this magnitude could make a real dent in the history books.

October 1, 1492

The Salami can't remember anyone's name. It seems the first two or three guys he signed up back in Palos de la Frontera were named Rodrigo, and now everybody's "Rodrigo." Doesn't do a lot for the old morale there, Admiral, when you see everyone under your command as interchangeable.

Well, now old Columbus has got all the Rodrigos in a lather. He announces that the king has commissioned him to offer a prize for the first seaman to see land: 10,000 maravedis cold, hard cash—every year for the rest of his scurvy, syphilitic life. That puts a cork in the mutiny talk for a while. That kind of green even gives me an erection, and I don't trust a word out of Columbus's mouth, including "Buenos días."

The same offer, however, applies to those aboard the Pinta and the Niña as well. And now whenever one of those smaller vessels gets more than a half-league ahead of us, you should hear the whining. Now, I'm as much a greed-head as the next guy, but what's the point of dangling this kind of reward in front of a bunch of deranged, freaked-out sailors? Are we somehow otherwise lacking in motivation to find land?

Early this morning, as we wait out the wind on the poop, I start shooting the breeze with a few of my fellow crew.

"What if we don't get to the Orient?" I suggest. "What if, just for argument's sake, there's some colossal continent between our western shores and Asia's eastern edge—some beautiful, undiscovered paradise?"

Well, tossing out that little speculation to these cats was like throwing a bamboo spear at the back of a blue whale. Didn't faze them. I've seen more comprehension in the eyes of a dead mackerel.

"What if we don't end up where the admiral says we will? I mean, he doesn't know what's out there any more than we do."

"What kind of ungodly talk is that?" says one of the Rodrigos, an ancient one-eyed lizard-skinned codger who, by the looks of him, is probably deep into his forties.

"Hey, I'm just sayin', this is uncharted waters. There could be anything out there. You guys have heard the stories, right?"

"Stories, what stories?" says one of the brain-damaged super-skinny ones.

"Oh come on," I say. "The race of giant green-skinned warriors with their faces in the middle of their chests? Sea serpents twenty leagues long who prefer Christians to heathens in their diets, and they can smell the difference too."

The sailors start to moan and murmur and I can't believe how much I'm enjoying this.

I hear a voice rise up from behind me near the stern: "You are of the devil!"

I stand and raise my hands. "Okay, time out here, fellas. I'm just messin' with your heads. It's just as likely that we find islands populated by beautiful but lonely young women dying to meet a few scurvy dogs like yourselves. We just don't know. But I'll tell you one thing, though. That reward the admiral has offered for the first one of us to spy land? Purely bogus, you watch. No matter who sees land first, Columbus will claim it for himself. You heard it here first."

Another voice yells out, "Seditious swine!" I notice a few murderous looks my way.

"Wait, you guys were ready to mutiny to turn around and go back to Spain, and I'm the troublemaker? What's wrong with this picture?"

Just then, Columbus himself shows up on deck, followed by his two lickspittle lieutenants, both of whom got their cozy posts by claiming to be fluent in various Asiatic languages. The admiral is the fattest man in the expedition by far, and it just floors me that no one seems to be putting two and two together, that this guy's got some food stashed away somewhere the rest of us will never see.

"Wondrous discovery, men," says Columbus, not bothering to make eye contact with anyone. He holds up a limp piece of seaweed the size of an anchovy. "We have found clear evidence of terrestrial flora. This sort of kelp grows only in shallow oceans near land. I would say we'll be making landfall in twenty-four to forty-eight hours,

perhaps a bit more if you people insist on loafing as you're doing now and betraying the trust your queen has invested in you."

With that, he disappears again to his quarters. I think that that piece of kelp looked a little too dried out to be freshly pulled up from the ocean. But I find it judicious to keep that observation to myself.

October 11, 1492

It's the bony tall Rodrigo with the horse's teeth who first screams "Land!" It's way past midnight, and he's been tied up in the mizzen on lookout for a couple of hours. I'm sleeping just aft, when I rouse myself to see him pointing starboard. Another Rodrigo in the foremast starts bellowing about land an instant later, but he's looking back at Horse Teeth, and everybody sees what's going on. This clown has already issued two false alarms in the past couple of days, and he's just setting himself up to make a claim on that reward.

For a minute or two, I think Horse Teeth has cried wolf too. The timing is just too convenient. Yesterday, the crew finally confronted Columbus and demanded we turn tail and head back home. You wouldn't believe the tantrums. Things got pretty weird real fast. You've never seen madness until you've seen piss-scared sailors in full-on panic mode. And the old Salami—got to hand it to him—he never flinched. Without raising his voice, he said that we were all going to be rich beyond our dreams with what we would find in the Far East. The men's cries turned to grumbling, and finally Columbus vowed that if we didn't see land in three days, we'd turn around. I'll never meet a smoother con man if I live to see fifty.

And now, just like that, a day after an outright threat to mutiny, we see land? Doesn't seem likely. But then, we all see it, a flickering light on the horizon. A fire on a sandy beach.

Then, as sure as Tuesday follows Monday, the admiral, waving his looking glass, says in a voice meant for all to hear, "Oh, yes, that's the fire I spied earlier." And one of his boot kissers confirms, "Yes, Admiral, that is the light you saw some three hours ago." There goes Horse Teeth's reward. Did I call it, or did I call it?

BRUCE TELOPA

Tuning Keys, 2013
Oil on Canvas 30 x 42 in



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A couple of the Rodrigues look at me in shock, but Horse Teeth just bows his head in subservience to his presiding officer. If I were in his shoes, I'd be screaming my sun-blistered head off at him, you can be sure of that. But I'm not going to risk my neck for this guy's sake if he doesn't have the stones to at least protest. The ship is overcome with jubilation at the sight of land, but Horse Teeth just stands there, barely able to muster a fake grin.

Flanked by the Niña and the Pinta, we shorten sail to wait out the night, and now it's clear that there's some kind of land mass on the horizon. Nobody's sleeping. The boys are buzzing with relief and excitement. Just yesterday, the Salami had to do some real tap dancing to keep his spooked beasts from hurling him into the briny. Hell, I probably would have been tossed in behind him.

But now all that tension is gone. The Rodrigues are grinning and hollering and talking about warehouses and wild game. I'm the one who's uneasy now. I had counted on Columbus's predictions to be total horseshit. Even as stupid as I am, I knew there's no way in heaven or hell that we're remotely close to Asia. Frankly, I was gearing up for a full-on mutiny, and the way I saw it, Columbus would almost certainly be run through—then probably barbecued: trust me, there is no barbarism too gruesome for berserk seamen—then two of the ships would turn back with the crybabies, and hopefully there would be enough real men to press on in the last ship. I would consider it an act of heroism to die out here in a place where no man in the history of the earth had ever lived or died. But I'm weird that way.

This, though, I didn't see coming. The admiral, jowly and pompous, announces to the crew that we've probably reached the shores of Japan and that he, along with his translators and the Pinzon brothers—the captains of the other two boats—would venture forth at dawn to present the queen's standard.

As the sky purples into dawn, the shore begins to come into clearer focus; and by the time the sun's rays knife over the eastern horizon, we see another wondrous sight—people. “Well, hang me to die,” exclaims one of the older Rodrigues, “but I believe these ones are naked as day!” The Salami peers through the looking glass for an eternal minute. Then he holds up the glass, offering it to others. It is like throwing a carcass to a pack of starving dogs.

I say it before I even think about it. “It's something else, some in-between, undiscovered land. It's a new world.”

As we watch Columbus's party drift to the surf in the longboat, flying the Spanish standard, I take advantage of the lull in the conversation to blurt out my suspicions.

“Fellas, I'm sorry, but there ain't no way this is Japan.”

“And what do you know of Japan, you scoundrel?” says the one bald Rodrigo who hates me the most.

“Nothing. But this doesn't smell right. Look, I doubt you fools know any of this, but back in Europe, Columbus couldn't find one mathematician who would confirm his theory that he could reach Asia by boat before we ran out of supplies. Not one. In Portugal, Britain, Spain, everybody told him the earth was much bigger than he thought it was.”

The old diseased Rodrigo laughs, “Well, what's before your very eyes, then? A mirage?”

I say it before I even think about it. “It's something else, some in-between, undiscovered land. It's a new world.”

“New world?” someone howls, and then the whole crew dissolves in laughter. I wonder, what the hell is so funny? Is the idea of an undiscovered continent in the middle of the Atlantic that ridiculous? Idiots! Here we are at maybe a turning point in world history and I'm surrounded by chuckleheads.

As we wait for Columbus's signal to swim ashore, something astonishing happens. We watch as several of the naked natives jump into the surf and begin swimming out toward us. In a surprisingly short time, we see several heads bobbing in the water around us, grinning and shouting incomprehensible syllables.

There's a lot of gift exchanging going on, but the one thing they need, I can't give them—and that's a healthy distrust of us.

"They seem friendly," says scar-faced Rodrigo. "Should we bring them aboard?"

"No," shouts bald Rodrigo. "We don't know what they want, and they might be armed."

"Armed?" I say. "These people are naked, dumbass. If they're hiding a cutlass on them, it's going to take them a while to get at it, if you know what I mean."

I lean out from the fo'c'sle and make eye contact with one of them treading water near the ship's prow. He's smiling widely and nodding, and I can't help but smile in return, waving my arm to him. He's a big, handsome guy with impossibly broad shoulders who seems to be expending little energy keeping himself afloat. He begins chattering excitedly, and it's obvious he's trying to talk to me. I feel a catch in my throat. If this is a new undiscovered world, and if these people are as unaware of our world as we are of theirs, then this is a huge moment. I wonder if he realizes it too.

Then, the man in the water holds up one arm, his fist closed. With an impish flash of his eyes, he opens his hand, as if offering a gift. For a second, I cannot breathe. In his hands are a couple of chunks of what appears to be gold. I'm hit with a wave of nausea. He obviously has no idea what gold does to men of my race. I am moved with pity for this grinning native and with grief for his naivete. He is completely unaware that the last peaceful day of his life was yesterday.

After swimming ashore, the Rodrigos disperse in every direction. Some stick around to gape at the naked men

and women—especially the women. Some roll in the sand in ecstasy. Some descend into the jungle looking for food and water. All the while, Columbus is speechifying, his chest puffed out, his eyes heavenward, like some perfumed French stage actor—to an audience that has never heard a syllable of Spanish. He says that he is ready and eager to make friends with the inhabitants of this strangely lush place, then our grand admiral claims the land in the name of Their Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

"That's some gesture of friendship," I say to a native woman standing beside me. She can't be any more uncomprehending than the Rodrigos, I figure.

"Do you know that that man over there just claimed your homeland after standing on the beach for all of five minutes?" The woman nods shyly.

"But here's the weird thing," I continue—two months without laying eyes on a woman and all I want is a confidant for my gripes about Columbus. "If he really believes he's found Japan, why on earth is he claiming it for Spain?" Three or four other natives gather around to watch me speak. "And I'm not stupid. I know the law of the seas, and you only claim a land for your mother country if it's uninhabited. And this land is, clearly, well..." I gesture grandly to them and they all break out laughing.

As the day wears on, the news just keeps getting better. There is plenty of fresh water, and we find these wonderfully pulpy orange fruits that are the finest things I have ever tasted in my eight and twenty years. I eat of them till I'm woozy.

The people are so kind and gentle as to be children. I sit in their huts and listen to them chatter. They show me some of their tools to hunt game and their magnificently colored squawking birds. Men, women, and children touch my clothes and my beard. They demonstrate their tumbling and climbing skills, and soon their nudity seems perfectly rational and it is I, in my coarse garments, who seems to be the unnatural one.

The only discordant note is that Columbus has issued an order that applies to the crews of all three vessels: that there will be no fornication with these native women until he says otherwise. This has turned many of the Rodrigos glum, as if they've already forgotten the blessings of the water and the fruit and the fact they've been liberated from that damnable boat.

The native men are strong and stout and taller than just about all of us Europeans. But they're so sweet-natured that, by all appearances, they'd have no problem allowing us to lie with their women. There's a lot of gift exchanging going on, but the one thing they need, I can't give them—and that's a healthy distrust of us. Unfortunately, that'll have to be earned.

Late in the afternoon, I return from a reconnaissance mission to the south, where I've spent four or five hours with a couple of native guides, seeing more of this glorious land—more fruit, more fresh water, more great timber and friendly natives. I approach Columbus with my report and find him relaxing in his makeshift camp, laughing with his cronies.

"Hello, Rodrigo," says the Salami. I have never seen him smile before now. The captain of the Pinta, noting my quizzical look, says, still laughing, "The admiral showed one of these savages his sword. And these people have obviously never seen a knife of any kind, given that they apparently don't have any iron. So, this stupid fellow grabs the admiral's sword by the sharp end, and slices two fingers to the bone."

Funny. A real rib tickler there, Admiral. The portent of these gentle people already shedding blood from Columbus's sword on our first day here makes my hair stand up on end.

I give Columbus my report of what I saw to the south. "Admiral, sir, if I may, I really don't think we're in Japan."

More laughs and general merriment. "Of course not, Rodrigo," says Columbus. "That's been determined. We're obviously in the Indian Sea here, so I'm firmly in accordance with the notion that we are in some remote, untrammelled corner of India."

"Uh, Esteban, sir. My name is Esteban. And, if you will, this is an island."

"Oh, and I assume you were picked up by the hair by one of these colored birds they have here and carried into the sky to make such a claim?"

Again, more laughter. "No sir, I..."

"Look, it's your job to tell me what you saw, not to interpret anything one way or the other. From my readings of the Bible, it appears that this place quite meets the description of the Garden of Eden. Perhaps we are in the vicinity of Eden. It would not surprise me. We need more

information, obviously. But, from my judgment, it's clear to me that, even if this is an island, it is an island of the Indies, and these inhabitants are Indian."

"Indian?"

"Have you actually met an Indian before, Rodrigo?"

"No, sir."

"Well, if you had, as I have, you would know by their skin color, the character of their faces, and the quality of their hair, that these savages are of the Indian race. Besides, I have an Arabic translator and a Japanese/Chinese translator here and neither man can understand a word of this strange tongue, so it is very much probably Hindi. You don't speak Hindi, do you, sailor?"

"Admiral. Is it at all possible that this isn't even Asia? That we've discovered some vast unknown in-between continent?"

The laughter erupts anew, and this time Columbus is leading the laughter. Quickly, though, his face turns stern and he fixes me with a glare.

"No, it's not possible. Your speculations are impudent. Tell me, did you find any gold?"

Gold. That's what it's all about with this cat. "There's no gold here," I lie.

"Nonsense," says Columbus, gesturing to a pile of crudely made gold jewelry on a coat in the sand behind him. "These people have already traded us all this for a few glass beads and baubles. I'm sure that they would give us all their worldly goods for our turds tied with ribbons."

The cronies dutifully break out in laughter. Columbus smirks an acknowledgment. "Rodrigo, these creatures are barely above animals. Gold means no more to them than other pebbles on the beach. Our gifts make them happy. It is our duty to be their steward. We were guided here, in fact, by the hand of the Almighty such that we might give these blind, stupid people the gift of the Lord's Holy Word. Repaying us in gold and service is small recompense for eternal life in Christ, I would wager."

"Service? Sir, do you propose to enslave these people?"

"Indeed, I do. As I would break a wild horse, and slay a wild boar for meat. All creatures have their utility. The queen did not finance this mission out of curiosity. I aim to bring her an ample return on her investment. Now, be-gone with you, and find me gold."

I slink away, nodding, intending to do no such thing.

October 19, 1492

Ah, what a night's sleep! Not since waking in the arms of my favorite Seville whore Consuela have I enjoyed such a deep and refreshing sleep.

How can we call these native people primitives if they've come up with such wondrous ideas as the *hamaca*, as they call it? It is a large fibrous net, suspended on two ends by ropes, that allows you to crawl inside and hang above the ground like a dolphin in a fishing net.

This is how the Amigos sleep! And it is so very comfortable that I awake each morning feeling like a new man.

Indeed, I think I am becoming a new man. I have taken leave of my duties to the Spanish crown, an offense for which I can be killed on the spot by any Rodrigo with a sword and the skill to use it. And still, I sleep free of troubles. I should be frightened not only for my life, but also for my immortal soul, as old Columbus would have it. In his view, I've surely turned my back on God the Father to embrace these heathens and their depraved way of life.

Yet, try as I might, I can't conjure one dot of concern for anything Columbus says or thinks, because I see him for what he really is now. His given name is "Cristobal," or "Christ bearer," and that's exactly how he sees himself—God's messenger to these ignorant people. But back in Spain, he will return as the gold bearer and the slave bearer, and soon the hordes will come from Europe to take from these people the very islands that have constituted their whole world. I know the European and the darkness in his heart. I am one of them.

The Amigos don't know it yet, but this Cristobal is, in fact, the death bearer.

October 21, 1492

A week ago, Columbus got restless after our first landfall. He named that island "San Salvador," and having become convinced that there were many islands in the area just like it, he led our expedition on to the next island, becoming increasingly single-minded about finding gold, coercing six natives aboard ship to serve as guides. And just like that, a new slave trade was born.

We reached that second island the next day, and a third the day after that. He called one Santa Maria de

la Concepcion, and the other Fernandina after our vain-glorious king. I saw no evidence that the Salami even entertained the idea that maybe these islands already had names. I love Jesus as much as the next Catholic, but He can't be happy with His holy name being used as justification to steal and plunder.

I was on board the Pinta the day we sighted what the admiral later called Fernandina, and as we sailed parallel to the coast, we watched as the natives came out to the beach, waving at us excitedly. They came by the scores, all along the coastline, calling and braying as we went by—some falling to their knees weeping, others diving into the surf to swim out where we were, offering up baskets of fruits, balls of cotton, anything and everything of value to them they were willing to give us.

All at once, I was overcome with emotion, and to my shock, my shoulders began to heave in a fit of weeping. One of the Rodrigos, the one with three fingers missing on one hand, looked at me in alarm. Noticing his gaze, I said, "Oh, if only Her Majesty Isabella could see how her new subjects are so grateful to be under the holy protection of her grace." You see, I can dish out the bullshit too, when the occasion calls for it.

In fact, it was at that moment that I was visited with a vision of what was to come—a full-on, honest-to-God prophecy the likes of which I had never experienced. Just as one of them touched Columbus's sword and almost lost his fingers, these peaceable people were swimming toward their own doom. They were mistaking us for gods, and yet we would be their destroyers. Columbus, behind his cross and his standard of the Spanish crown, would annihilate everything we were gazing upon at that moment.

Could I stop such a thing? No easier than I could stop the sun from moving across the sky. But if God had given me a jot of free will, then I had a choice about whether to be an instrument in Spain's hand—and right there on the Pinta's starboard, I decided that I was not.

That was three days ago. After making landfall on Fernandina, I set out, as I was instructed, to find gold and/or spices, carrying nothing but my best knife and my notebook. I disappeared into the interior of the island, and after a journey of five, maybe six, hours, I came upon a village of Amigos on the opposite side of the island. As I emerged

from the jungle, they all looked at me in surprise, but I saw no fear.

As is their wont, they welcomed me, chattering musically, offering me food and water. I smiled and collapsed on the sand, and they carried me into one of their huts. I knew no other way to communicate my acceptance of their hospitality than to shed my clothing and become as naked as they were. Nothing about me was as mysterious to them as my exposed skin, white as the pope's paper in places where it was not covered in hair.

The hairless dark-skinned men and women looked at me quizzically. And as I sat down in the hut, three children brought in containers of water, and with each of them holding a tiny piece of fibrous cloth, they began to rub my back, my shoulders, my belly.

After they had rubbed well past the point of washing me, it struck me with wonder and awe that they were trying to wipe the white off my skin! Again, I was engulfed in emotion, and like a perfect madman, started crying and laughing at the same time. Soon, I took one of the pieces of fiber and began joining in, scrubbing my own skin with fury. But the white was not to come off.

I cannot say now what I am to do. Certainly, by now, I am being sought for desertion. Yet I also know that Columbus is so addled by his search for gold, I doubt that he would bother to spare the men to come find me. Perhaps he can't even conceive that someone would willingly join in with the natives, and has figured I met my end somewhere in the unknown jungle.

Regardless, I will not hide. I join in with the men of the village, building structures and fishing. If the Rodrigos find me, I am with perfect honesty ready to die.

I'm standing naked waist-deep in the ocean, watching fish of amazing colors shoot past me, and I've never known such simple joy. I'm now babbling as much as the Amigos are, telling them everything about the voyage from the day I signed on out of Palos. I confess to them all the fears I have about my race, and the visions of dread I have about the Spanish thirst for gold, and they don't understand a word of it. All of my life has led me to this moment. I realize with a jolt of ecstasy that I am a man with no name, with no past, lost in a seductive new world.

Then, a younger Amigo comes running down the beach from the south and gestures to me in excitement.

He wants me to follow him, and I do. He's a strong young sapling, and I have trouble keeping up with him. But after a half hour or so of running, we turn the corner of a grove of trees and he points in the distance.

There, I see the stern of the Santa Maria ponderously sailing away in the far distance. The Pinta and the Niña, well beyond her, are barely dark shapes on the horizon.

The boy has obviously made the connection between me and the mysterious ships. He looks at me soberly, gesturing toward the ships and waving his arms as if swimming. He is saying that he will swim out to the ship with me to help me get back on board. I shake my head and smile. "No, let them go," I say to him. "If God is just, the sea will swallow those ships before they make it back to Spain, and these islands will remain a mystery to all of Christendom for a few more generations at least. But if we see them again, then we'll know that God has abandoned us, His Holy Word is merely a silly children's fable, and I'll take my place to die in this paradise alongside all of you."

He laughs. I laugh with him. We turn back to the village, again running for our lives.

Despite persistent rumors to the contrary, **Wallace Baine** has not been working as a newspaper columnist in Santa Cruz since the Mexican-American War. In fact, he began covering the absurdly fertile Santa Cruz County arts and culture community for the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* in 1991 as a beat reporter, interviewer, film critic, and columnist. He is a two-time winner of the national American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors (AASFE) Excellence-in-Feature-Writing competition for his well-known Sunday column "Baine Street," and has won several awards for his arts coverage from the California Newspaper Publishers Association (CNPA). Baine and *Sentinel* photographer Shmuel Thaler also administer the annual Gail Rich Awards, honoring local artists and arts supporters in the Santa Cruz area. Baine is the author of the book *Rhymes with Vain: Belabored Humor and Attempted Profundity*. The story "Voyage of the Rodrigos" is taken from his new book of short stories, *The Last Temptation of Lincoln*. You can get the book and read his columns at www.wallacebaine.com